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# **Postcolonial Melancholia: Theory, Interpretation and the Novel**

**By**

**Eli Park Sorensen**

A thesis submitted to University College London, University of London, in conformity  
with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

In my doctoral dissertation, I discuss and explore notions of the literary and literary form in postcolonial studies. Beginning with a focus on recent expressions of unease about the theoretical paradigms through which the postcolonial perspective responds to literary texts, I discuss the emergence of what I call postcolonial melancholia, an atmosphere induced by the increased institutionalisation in academia in recent years. Using Freud's notion of melancholia, as a form of ghostly identification with an absent object, I explore what leading critics have seen as a loss of contemporary postcolonial criticality, and which I see as intimately related to the problematic ways in which the dimension of the literary has been used.

In the second part of my dissertation, I analyse and discuss various literary strategies as formulated in three formally different postcolonial novels – Ousmane Sembene's *Xala*, J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* – in order to map the contradictions, limitations but also possibilities of novelistic representation in postcolonial space. My overall critical perspective will be informed by the works of Georg Lukács, and in particular his notion of a utopian-interpretive realist ideal, developed in the early work *Theory of the Novel*. My argument is that this utopian-interpretive realist ideal can also be seen as a particularly useful notion in connection with what I see as the *literary* dimension in many postcolonial novels, as it is situated in between complex socio-political agendas and aesthetic-representational problematics.

Lukács's formal-literary ideal is repeated in his later writings on realism from the thirties, but notably in a transfigured way – as an extra-literary, authoritative *norm*. The dynamic of this trajectory, one that moves from idealism to dogmatism, can (with certain

modifications) be seen as similar to the development of the field of postcolonial critical discourse – moving from an early, idealistic beginning, to an increasingly dogmatic, prescriptive and authoritarian academic discourse. By using the trajectory of Lukács's realist ideal as a comparative background, I attempt explore alternative ways of conceiving postcolonial literariness; ways that may help the field of postcolonial studies to come to terms with what I see as the symptom of postcolonial melancholia, haunting the contemporary discipline.

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## Introduction

Until recently, thinking about aesthetics, literariness and literary form within the field of postcolonial studies would have seemed hopelessly reactionary and contradictory. However, in this thesis I want to argue that not only is this view deeply misinformed, but furthermore that the field of postcolonial studies *needs* to return to a discussion of these contentious issues, quite simply because literary texts still occupy a central role within the discipline. My argument should be seen alongside recent postcolonial critical works attempting to rethink the notion of literary form, yet I also differ noticeably from these works; returning to a focus on the literary dimension in postcolonial studies can be productive in a number of different ways, I believe, but this in itself would only have limited potential. What seems to be needed is also a radical rethinking of the complex *relationship* between notions of the literary and the interests and imperatives of the field of postcolonial studies.

One of the characteristic aspects of the identity of postcolonial studies is its socio-politically committed critique of modernity. Literary texts have played a key role in the development of many of the field's dominating concepts and imperatives, and my thesis begins with a discussion of some of the typical ways in which literary texts have been treated and used to sustain, support and verify this postcolonial identity. One of my arguments is that the relationship between the dimension of postcolonial literary aesthetics and postcolonial studies as an academic discipline involves a potential but also a risk; it involves a potential insofar as both parts may enrich each other, but also a risk that one part may become radically undermined by the other.

The discipline of postcolonial studies has contributed in important ways to the rethinking of how we understand the notions of aesthetics and literariness today. A widely

accepted notion among many postcolonial critics today is that literary texts are valuable, not so much for their aesthetic qualities, but rather their depiction of representative minority experience and formulations of strategies of resistance.

But even if many postcolonial critics today categorically dismiss the dimension of the aesthetic, I argue that one often finds a tacit set of aesthetic values and norms operating in readings of postcolonial texts, which helps to support some of the ways in which postcolonial critics *use* literary texts. I refer to this underlying set of aesthetic values as ‘the modernist ethos’, which more specifically designates what I see as the formulaic acceptance of a ‘correspondence’ between a vocabulary of political concepts and modernist aesthetic techniques, such as for example excessive formal disruptions, meta-fictional strategies, and complex language games.

I argue that this formula involves an uncritical ‘leap’, which translates the aesthetic dimension into a corresponding vocabulary of political concepts and imperatives in a regulative and simplifying way. This formula has contributed to what I see as the institutionalisation of contemporary postcolonial studies. The modernist ethos, dominating postcolonial literary criticism today (i.e. poststructuralist-, postmodernist-, and Marxist-oriented versions of postcolonial literary criticism) involves an interpretational problematic; it involves a loss of distance in relation to certain literary texts that are selected, canonised, and seen as representative of the political claims that the field of postcolonial studies makes, but selected only insofar as they correspond to, and thus support and legitimise, these claims. As such, much postcolonial literature is typically read in a dogmatic and prescriptive way, while the identity of postcolonial studies increasingly has become homogenised. In one sense, this development can be seen as a sign of success; today the



field of postcolonial studies occupies an authoritative position of power, no longer situated along the margins of academia but at its centre. In another sense, this development is a sign of failure, a failure which to some extent is revealed through the field's relation to postcolonial literature.

The homogenised way of treating literary texts has led to what leading critics have observed as an atmosphere of 'melancholia' in postcolonial studies, induced by the increased institutionalisation in academia in recent years; the melancholic awareness of the loss of an identity that is genuinely critical and radical. I link this notion of loss to the lack of an elaborate way of reading the postcolonial aesthetic dimension, a lack which I see as the consequence of the field's dogmatic desire to legitimise its position as *the* radical perspective in academia (i.e. using literature in a highly regulative and prescriptive way). Contemporary postcolonial melancholia can thus also be seen as an awareness of the problematic way in which the postcolonial aesthetic dimension has been treated, a treatment through which it has been transformed into a legitimising device, that is, a critical construction. What is lost in this critical construction is precisely the *potential* of the literary.

Melancholia, in the Freudian sense, is characterised by the subject's ghostly identification with an absent object, causing a narcissistic and distorted self-critique. Having gained an uncomfortable level of institutional authority, the melancholia of postcolonial studies can be seen as an expression of the failed attempt to identify *with* the potential of the literary, the constitutive site of negative, contingent marginality. Postcolonial melancholia thus at the same time signals the 'return of the repressed', that is, the return of the figures of the literary, not as a critical construction but as the unverifiable

margin of otherness and singularity, revealing some of the blind spots in postcolonial studies.

My argument is informed by what I see as a recent movement in postcolonial studies, namely the return to a focus on aesthetics, literariness and literary form. This movement includes works such as Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (2003), Deepika Bahri's *Native Intelligence* (2003), Nicholas Harrison's *Postcolonial Criticism* (2003), Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* (2004) and J.M. Coetzee: *The Ethics of Reading* (2004), Neil Lazarus' 'The Politics of Postcolonial Modernism' (2005), and Nicholas Brown's *Utopian Generations* (2005). These recent works constitute vital attempts to resituate a renewed argument for a focus on the importance of literary form within postcolonial studies. My argument differs in various ways from these works, primarily because I do not see the significance of the postcolonial aesthetic dimension as being ignored; rather, I argue that it operates tacitly, legitimising certain correspondences between particular aesthetic strategies and particular political imperatives (i.e. what I have referred to as the modernist ethos).

The potential danger inherent in these recent works, attempting to trace postcolonial melancholia while at the same time calling for a renewed attention toward the aesthetic dimension, is that they may possibly repeat, albeit no longer *tacitly* but *explicitly*, what I see as the institutionalised formula that makes it legitimate to assume certain correspondences between modernist aesthetic techniques and a certain vocabulary of political concepts. What is needed, I argue, is a widening of the aesthetic and political codifications operating either tacitly or explicitly in contemporary postcolonial studies, that is, the development of a critical perspective which is broad enough to include literary aesthetics and modalities not

necessarily corresponding to modernist criteria, and thus not necessarily corresponding, in an 'agreeable' way, to the dominating socio-political mantras promoted by postcolonial studies – literary aesthetics such as the modality of realism, which has often been misread and caricatured by many postcolonial critics.

Attempting to develop such a critical perspective, not in an exhaustive way but as a tentative suggestion for a possible future direction of postcolonial studies, I revisit some aspects of the trajectory of Georg Lukács's works, from the early *The Theory of the Novel* (published in 1920) to his realist writings from the thirties. My use of Lukács's writings (as well as the writings of Freud) may seem eclectic, selective, and uncritical, but I want to stress here that the primary goal of this thesis is *not* a revision of Lukács's work as such (that is, my thesis is *not* a wholehearted defence of Lukács), but rather a pragmatic attempt to re-activate some of the theoretical concerns that occupied Lukács throughout his career within the context of postcoloniality, and with the distinct aim of foregrounding some of the theoretical impasses in postcolonial theory (rather than in Lukács's oeuvre); my use of Lukács should be seen as an attempt to approach, with a specific eye to the needs of postcoloniality, an *alternative* notion of literary potential which – for reasons that I will discuss at length – has been neglected in much postcolonial literary criticism.

In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács formulates what I see as a utopian-interpretive realist *ideal*, at work at the formal level of novelistic discourse; according to the early Lukács, novelistic discourse consists of a sequence of events that are always-already interpreted as being somehow related to one another (even if this relation is interpreted as a non-relation), and which together form a narrative totality; the parts or events remain, however, only abstractly related to each other, or, indeed, *interpreted* as being related (in

contrast to the epic in which all parts are organically or naturally connected), and as such they do not form a truthful totality, but rather an ironic totality. Through the construction of this ironic totality, the utopian-interpretive realist ideal *works through* relations, codifications, and constellations, generating what Lukács sees as a glimpse of the epic dream, the absolute truth, which is also the point where interpretation as such ceases, that is, the point at which every part is truthfully and organically determined by the whole (albeit a point which can only be glimpsed, not reached).

In the later Lukács's realist writings from the thirties, this realist ideal, as formulated in *The Theory of the Novel*, is repeated, but notably in a circumscribed way – not so much an *ideal* as an extra-literary, authoritative *norm* (partly due to Lukács's increased political involvement); a trajectory that to some extent can be seen as a useful comparative background against which one may observe and analyse some of the problems characterising the contemporary field of postcolonial studies, which, after its idealistic beginning, has become increasingly authoritarian. Returning to the literary in postcolonial studies, I argue, may draw significant inspiration from the trajectory of Lukács's work, both as an implicit warning against the dangers of institutionalisation, and as a revaluation of the importance of the literary, as a utopian-interpretive realist ideal.

In the last three chapters of my dissertation I provide readings of three postcolonial novels, each using a different literary modality, through which I want to develop my critique of what I see as the inadequacies, problematics and limitations in postcolonial studies, and also develop a critical perspective, informed by Lukács's notion of the utopian-interpretive realist ideal, which moves beyond what I have referred to as the modernist ethos in postcolonial studies.

The first novel I discuss is Ousmane Sembene's *Xala* (1973), which, I argue, attempts to explore disjointed connections that can only be reconnected negatively, through a narrative principle embodied symbolically in the dimension of the xala (meaning the curse of impotence). The novelistic dynamic of *Xala* brings together different narrative constellations, mutually cancelling each other out, in an effort to demarcate, negatively, the absence of the form of truth; a form reverberating as the haunting spectacle of Senegalese post-independence history itself.

In chapter five, I discuss J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), one of the most read and discussed texts in postcolonial studies. The chapter focuses on postcolonial modernism and canonisation, which I investigate through a discussion of the question of the literary within a postcolonial perspective. I argue that *Foe* is a novel that explores the limits of aesthetic representation, but also a novel that to some extent avoids taking interpretive risks. *Foe* has often been read as an example of postcolonial 'writing back to the centre', and I discuss the implications of such a reading, arguing that to categorise the novel as a strategy of 'writing back' may also lead to a reductive appreciation of the text's literary dimension.

In the final chapter of my dissertation, I focus more concretely on what can be seen as an 'orthodox' realist postcolonial text, namely Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. Mistry's novel offers a micro-cosmos of the complex and intricate relationship between individual characters and the larger, historical-political forces and dynamics. I argue that Mistry's realism attempts to *work through* and *establish* connections between elements which, in themselves, are apparently meaningless or enigmatic – something which precisely is achieved through the coherent, progressing *realist* dynamic. Mistry's realist form provides an interpretational schematic through which readers may develop a sense of how

the dynamics of the connective and determinative powers of history are experienced at various levels in postcolonial space.

My thesis should first and foremost be seen as a critical investigation of some of the limits and dangers of the contemporary academic field of postcolonial studies, as well as an attempt to formulate a possible future direction, namely the return to the literary. Returning to the literary, I argue, may lead to an alternative appreciation of the more *constructive* aspects at stake in the literary work, rather than merely focusing on literature's deconstructive qualities. Above all, vital to a focus on postcolonial literariness is a critical awareness of literary texts' complex relationship to the theoretical framework through which they are being studied.

# Part I

# Chapter One

## The Melancholia of Postcolonial Studies

The forms of the artistic genres are not arbitrary. On the contrary, they grow out of the concrete determinacy of the particular social and historical conditions. (Lukács 1969, 118)<sup>1</sup>

The most profoundly social aspect of literature is its form, as the young Lukács once insolently put it (before he grew up, and forgot). (Moretti 2000, xii)

### Aesthetics and Postcolonial Studies

In the following I wish to address the relationship between literature and postcolonial studies.<sup>2</sup> My main aim is to frame some of the questions emerging from this relationship in order to establish the basis for a renewed debate about the study of formal-literary aspects within the academic field of postcolonial studies. As this chapter will constitute

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Frow (1986); 10 (Frow's translation). Contrary to what the following quotation by Moretti might suggest, Lukács still believed 'in the organic connection between the institution of genre and history' (Frow 1986, 10) as late as 1952.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation I will refer indistinguishably to 'postcolonial studies', 'postcolonial theory', and 'postcolonial criticism' (or 'postcolonial literary criticism'), in order to emphasise what I see as the *academic* discourse of postcoloniality (as distinct from postcolonial literary texts, written mainly outside academia). Hereby I am not suggesting that there are no significant differences between, say, postcolonial *theory* and postcolonial *criticism*, but this dissertation will primarily focus on their *shared* features within a discourse which is seen in relation to literature. For a discussion of the differences between postcolonial theory and postcolonial criticism, see chapter one and chapter five in Bart Moore-Gilbert's *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* ('Postcolonial criticism or postcolonial theory?' and 'Postcolonial criticism and postcolonial theory'); 5-33 & 152-184. From another, and more sceptical perspective, see part four in Robert Fraser's *Lifting the Sentence: A poetics of postcolonial fiction* ('Part Four: Postcolonial Theory as Fiction'); 213-230



an overall point of reference for the first part of my dissertation, I will attempt to distil a set of theoretical issues to be explored in the succeeding chapters. Hence, this chapter should be seen as an attempt to open up an area of aspects related to a contemporary discussion of aesthetics, literariness, and literary form<sup>3</sup> within postcolonial studies, rather than an outline of a fixed set of definitive, theoretical conclusions.

Hardly anyone today takes the relationship between the ‘forms of artistic genres’ and ‘particular social and historical conditions’ as seriously as Georg Lukács apparently did. Today it has become common to view the study of literary form as a de-historicising activity; ‘Form’, W.J.T. Mitchell writes, ‘seems at best to belong to the merely instrumental sphere of means’. That the concept of form today seems anachronistic is in part due to what Mitchell observes as the ‘emergence of a committed scholarship, one that sees the work of art (like culture, society, and politics) as a constructed entity, an arbitrary assemblage of parts, and not as an organic form governed by inner necessities’ (Mitchell 2003, 322). If the interest in literary form *generally* has waned in contemporary literary debates, this is *particularly* the case in postcolonial studies. As postcolonial literary studies from an overall point of view has tended to focus its energy around formulations of radical critiques of discourses of

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<sup>3</sup> In chapter one I will refer to an overall concept of the literary, using notions such as ‘the aesthetic’, ‘literariness’, ‘literary discourse’ and ‘literary form’, without defining it in a more refined way (which I will attempt to do in subsequent chapters), because I want to highlight both the overall neglect of this dimension, while also framing some of the difficulties in maintaining such a distinction between ‘the literary’ and ‘the extra-literary’ in postcolonial studies. One might object that ‘the literary’ is not necessarily the same as ‘literary form’, with which I would partially agree; however, my argument is that the concept of the literary dimension, literature’s *differentia specifica*, can most advantageously be discussed through a focus on literary form (or what other theorists in various ways have referred to as discourse, composition, *sjuzhet*, plot etc.), precisely as a means to explore the ambiguous potential and legitimacy of literary texts. Hence, I use ‘literary form’ as a practical way of framing the ways in which ‘literary content’ has been fetishised in much postcolonial criticism, without thereby at the same time fetishising or essentialising a distinction between form and content; on the contrary, as will become more clear in the subsequent chapters when I discuss the potential of realism, I am arguing for a formal concept which must be seen as intimately connected with the literary work’s content.

power,<sup>4</sup> it is perhaps not surprising that very few postcolonial literary analyses have engaged with an actual postcolonial poetics of literature, in which literary *form*, and not just certain isolated formal aspects, is prioritised.

The general suspicion with which concepts like literary form, the specifically literary, and the aesthetic have been regarded within the discipline of postcolonial literary criticism, is closely linked to considerations of the undoubtedly precarious combination of social concerns and artistic norms which, at an initial glance, forms the *raison d'être* of many of the so-called postcolonial novelists, burdened by a political demand of aesthetic 'liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden' (Benjamin 1999, 251). Faced with the overwhelming task of voicing the history of the oppressed, it may appear not only as a superfluous luxury for writers, critics and readers to dwell on aspects such as literary form and the specificity of literature, but equally troublesome as well in an ethical sense; to argue for the importance of the formal dimension of a literary work as such has sometimes been accused of constituting a smokescreen for ideological positions reinforcing Eurocentric notions.

These accusations have contributed valuable reflections to the debate about the function and importance of modes of aesthetic representativity. In the hugely influential study *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* from 1978, one of the founding

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<sup>4</sup> I am here focusing on the academic field of postcolonial studies, beginning, roughly, with Edward Said's *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* from 1978; my focus should, however, not be seen as a devalorisation of the important work done outside western academia (and before *Orientalism*) by for example Frantz Fanon, W.E.B. Du Bois, and C.L.R. James, but rather be seen as an attempt to trace the delineations of a contemporary notion of the literary within a largely academically-led field of postcolonial studies, defined by Bart Moore-Gilbert as a 'set of reading practices, if it is understood as preoccupied principally with analysis of cultural forms which mediate, challenge or reflect upon the relations of domination and subordination – economic, cultural and political – between (and often within) nations, races or cultures, which characteristically have their roots in the history of modern European colonialism and imperialism and which, equally characteristically, continue to be apparent in the present era of neo-colonialism' (Moore-Gilbert 2000, 12).

texts in the field of postcolonial studies, Edward Said demonstrates how the institutions of western aesthetics, and literary texts in particular, in some cases helped to sustain an ideologically distorted mode of representing cultural otherness. From another perspective, Gauri Viswanathan has in the book *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* illustrated ways in which 'the discipline of English came into its own in an age of colonialism' (Viswanathan 1990, 2), and, as such, could be seen as a subtle paradigm supporting and developing imperialist ideologies in which the identity of a body of classic, English literature would take on an important political-didactic function with which it was not manifestly associated. On the basis of Viswanathan's reflections, John Beverley sums up:

Literature provided the British with a way of negotiating the contradictions internal to their own project between Parliament, the missionaries, and the East India Company, between the colonial administration and the Indian elites in their various caste and sectarian configurations, and between these elites in turn (who above their ethnic and religious differences could share through English literature a common model of cultural excellence and ethical superiority) and the Indian subaltern classes. What allowed it to play this mediating function in the colonies was precisely its *distance* as a "modern," secularized, cultural practice from religious dogma and traditional cultures. (Beverley 1993, 26-27)

The interrogation of canonical literature's complicity with imperialist ideology forms an important perspective in postcolonial literary criticism, but simultaneously the field has had a considerable impact on the promotion of the radical value of new literatures from former colonies. Indeed, following up on both Said and Viswanathan's arguments, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, in their equally hugely influential book *The Empire Writes Back*, suggest that it is precisely the emergence of postcolonial literatures that has urged the field of literary studies to interrogate 'the canonical nature and unquestioned status of the works of the English literary tradition and the values they incorporated' (Ashcroft & Griffiths & Tiffin 2002, 4). Although the process of demystifying a Eurocentric aesthetic tradition from a worldly point of view

cannot of course solely be attributed to the rise of postcoloniality, *The Empire Writes Back* points to a potential of the literary text, which to some extent is similar to what Fredric Jameson has seen as the 'different ratio of the political to the personal' (Jameson 1986, 69); whereas the political dimension in many contemporary western novels is like a 'pistol shot in the middle of a concert' (Stendhal quoted in Jameson 1986, 69), Jameson argues, the 'third-world' text's clearly marked emphasis on a politicised mode of representing marginalised voices within a public-national framework, seems to demand a rethinking of what is usually discussed and valorised as literary qualities.

This process of rethinking literary values seems, however, to many postcolonial critics largely to be a closed chapter by now. After the virulent attacks on the traditional humanist notions of the aesthetic and the literary, it has become something of a taboo to raise aesthetic-formal concerns that go beyond those already formulated within postcolonial studies.<sup>5</sup> Literary departments may still be leading the field of postcolonial studies, but the *literary*, as John Brenkman argues, seems to have become 'little more than the buzzword of those English department sentimentalists who proudly, defiantly announce their love of literature' (Brenkman 2003, 116).<sup>6</sup> Few would disagree that 'We no longer subscribe to the belief that a literary text can be isolated from the contexts out

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<sup>5</sup> Obviously, I am generalising here in order to draw a picture of some of the larger contours of a field; literary texts occupy a very prominent position in postcolonial studies, but they are generally valued, I would argue, more for their 'extra-literary' qualities than for their 'literariness'. Here, I specifically refer to what I see as a rather puzzling lack of interest in discussing, positively, the specifically literary, and an equally puzzling lack of a sophisticated account of literary form, within the disciplinary fields of cultural- and postcolonial studies.

<sup>6</sup> In his book *The Employment of English*, Michael Bérubé offers an amusing overview of the ominous 'fate' of literature as reflected in contemporary graduate work, arguing that although the literary as such within the perspective of cultural studies seems marginalised, there is no need to fear that literature as such will disappear or lose its value; what is, however, problematic is the tendency to elaborate receptive conclusions drawn from literary examples *before* one actually engages with them – a problematic, which, on the other hand, is not only restricted to contemporary criticism but perhaps a characteristic aspect in the history of literary theory generally.

of which it was produced, or from the historical conditions of its production' (Tiffin 1984, 26). To many postcolonial critics this means that to study literary form as a primary aim reinforces 'imperialist politics implicit in the "universalist" claims of European literary criticism' (ibid). Arun Mukherjee formulates a typical view when she argues that to focus on form may lead to a Eurocentric perspective, comparing (often unfavourably) western and non-western texts, which leaves 'no time for dealing with the specificity of ... [non-western] texts' (Mukherjee 1986, 346). Such an approach would not only depoliticise those texts, but also, as Tiffin argues, render 'them derivative or subsidiary' (Tiffin 1984, 28).

Given the field's strong disciplinary affiliations with a number of other theoretical discourses, the marginalisation of a focus on the literary in postcolonial studies shares certain similarities with concerns raised in for example feminism and Marxism. Tracing the marginal position of aesthetics in Marxist criticism, Michèle Barrett argues that 'It is not that Marxism has failed to develop a tradition of work on aesthetics but rather that such concerns are currently out of fashion and, indeed, are often seen as politically reprehensible' (Barrett 1988, 697). The influence of ideological concerns has been one reason, Barrett argues, for the neglect and limitations of aesthetic inquiries. Another, and to some extent related, reason is the dominance of structuralism, poststructuralism and deconstruction, that is, critical perspectives emphasising 'the text's internal powers of meaning construction' as well as 'the multiplicity of readings available in consumption' (699). This dominance has, however, also introduced what Barrett sees as a 'principled relativism of the aesthetic' (701), which is dangerous because it leaves out 'a range of important questions connected with cultural and

aesthetic *experience*' (699), such as for example what is experienced as subversive for what particular reasons. To put it in a crude way – should a popular work of art be deemed as equally subversive as, say, a Rembrandt, and, if so, should they be deemed as equals in terms of value? What is needed in Marxist criticism, Barrett argues, is 'to engage with the widely held belief that one work is "better" than another and produce convincing arguments either about why this is not so or about what it is based upon' (701). Otherwise, the potential of the aesthetic is too easily reduced to an ideologically prescriptive set of evaluative codes. Seeing the value of an author's work as the equivalent of a particular ideology, 'so common in the content analysis type of radical literary criticism' denies what Barrett sees as the role of aesthetic mediation, the 'ambiguity of aesthetic codes' (702).

One may observe a number of symptomatic overlaps between Barrett's critique of the marginalised dimension of the aesthetic within the field of Marxist criticism, and the equally marginalised dimension of the literary within the field of postcolonial studies. The tendency to ignore questions of the specificity of literature in postcolonial literary criticism has produced an overwhelmingly large amount of analyses and interpretations of literature constituting the pretext for discussing more extra-literary phenomena, that is, using literature in an instrumental way 'as a means to broad cultural conclusions' (Levine 1994, 5), such as representational strategies of minority experience as well as figures of historical and national consciousness, which possibly, as Terry Eagleton polemically has remarked, have come close to resembling a 'good old-fashioned content analysis' (Eagleton 1999, 4). Although one may object that there is an important distinction between the content analysis of postcolonial literary criticism

and then earlier forms of humanist-impressionistic literary criticism, a distinction that I have no intention of diminishing, Eagleton's comment touches upon an important, yet largely neglected, issue.

And yet, while I argued above that it has become something of a taboo to raise concerns about aesthetic-literary concerns beyond those already formulated, it is at the same time important to clarify here that this does not imply that aesthetic-literary concerns play no relevance within the field of postcolonial studies. Returning to the study of form would have, I believe, certain advantages in emphasising and clarifying the particular potential of literary discourse, without thereby also implying a return to an 'a-historical', 'universal' and 'autonomous' notion of the literary text, as feared by many postcolonial critics. Rather, my argument is that a closer investigation of aesthetic-literary concerns would implicitly raise a series of important questions, such as what literary aspects are valued, directly or indirectly, in terms of the objectives of the postcolonial, and which objectives would have influence on this process of value-coding.<sup>7</sup> Alison Donnell has observed that

Although postcolonial scholarship developed in opposition to prescriptive modes of thought, the consolidation and institutionalization of its works would seem to have generated in some respects an

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<sup>7</sup> In a recent anthology called *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies*, Michael Bérubé and Rita Felski, among others, address what they see as a recent trend among academics to 'Return to Beauty' (Bérubé 2005, 2), while simultaneously accusing cultural studies and other – theory-obsessed – fields for being aesthetically insensitive. Among those advancing such arguments are works like Alvin Kernan's *The Death of Literature*, John Ellis' *Literature Lost*, James Soderholm's *Beauty and the Critic*, Peggy Brand's *Beauty Matters*, Wendy Steiner's *Venus in Exile*, Denis Donoghue's *Speaking of Beauty*, and Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just*. To Bérubé and Felski, these works constitute a misguided critical impetus, which reveals a lack of knowledge of what cultural studies *actually* is doing; in Felski's words, 'One of the ways in which cultural studies distinguishes itself from the politicized wing of literary studies is precisely by questioning the view that a single work can be treated as an allegory of social relations' (Felski 2005, 39). Felski feels that the 'accounts of beauty under threat from the villanous machinations of cultural studies' (ibid.) are getting tiresome since to her cultural studies has *always* shared an interest in form and the dimension of the aesthetic (for a similar argument see Kacandes 2005, and Hunter 1992). Although Felski's notion of the aesthetic is one that leaves out a great deal of what I feel the above-mentioned works address, it is important here to stress that when I am arguing for a return to the study of form and attention to the aesthetic dimension in postcolonial literary texts, this argument should be seen as distinctly different from recent calls for a return to a notion of beauty.

unhelpful homogenization of political intent and a stifling consensus of “good” practice. (Donnell 1995, 101)

Some of these aspects involve predictability and self-congratulating canonisations of ‘resistant subjects and rebellious discourses’ (ibid.), that is, ‘a preference for perfect political credentials’ (102), followed by a neglect of writers whose works are not disengaged from colonial culture in an explicitly self-conscious way; this situation, Donnell argues, ‘not only condemns writers to dismal and oppressed self-defining narratives but burdens readers with a baggage of unresolved cultural sensitivities, and critics with a tireless round of congratulations and careful critiques’ (ibid.). If, as many postcolonial critics argue, the aesthetic in its narrow definition no longer plays any determining role in relation to the subversive qualities of postcolonial literary texts (or non-subversive potential in relation to canonical texts), would an *aesthetically* ‘conventional’ or ‘unimaginative’ text be regarded as equally valuable in relation to the postcolonial *political* imperatives? According to Martina Michel, the texts being most often canonised as representative of postcoloniality ‘tend to be texts that satisfy Western (post-modern) criteria of evaluation. They are experimental, make extensive use of irony, resist closure, question traditional boundaries, employ intertextual strategies etc.’ (Michel 1995, 85). A brief glance through many contemporary postcolonial literary analyses would confirm this argument, which furthermore demonstrates that aesthetic-literary concerns and standards still play a vital role, and that for example realism is indeed not as highly valued as for example magical realism; while this or that author is being praised for employing specific textual strategies that allegedly are subversive, representative, or revelatory within a postcolonial situation, other, more conventional authors, are often being ignored, and, as such, implicitly deemed less representative of



the postcolonial. Although postcolonial literary analyses in most cases decode literary texts against the background of specifically *political* objectives, these objectives are often mobilised and legitimised according to an implicit and tacit set of aesthetic norms. Postcolonial studies may explicitly have marginalised the aesthetic, but aesthetic concerns still exert significant influence (i.e. in the form of a preference for the type of literary modalities that Martina Michel mentions). However, this influence remains largely ambiguous and unquestioned. That postcolonial studies has not paid enough *explicit* attention to the specificity of literary and aesthetic modes of representation, has led to a series of methodological problems which I will raise in the following, while hoping to clarify the reasons behind my argument, namely why it would seem necessary to return to a study of literary form within postcolonial studies.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Modernist Ethos**

In order to investigate deeper how aesthetic-literary concerns have played a vital, albeit ambiguous, role in postcolonial studies, I want to focus on what Martina Michel has seen as the preference for a particular kind of literary works. However, whereas Michel refers to what she sees as the dominance of postmodernist criteria, I will refer to this preference as the ‘modernist ethos’. In my formulation of this notion, I follow some of the critical arguments that Raymond Williams, in the posthumously published work *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, has directed toward the politics of

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<sup>8</sup> As Nicholas Harrison observes, ‘there has recently been talk in postcolonial circles of “the return of the literary”’ (Harrison 2005, iii); a tendency to which Harrison’s own work belongs (see for example Harrison’s *Postcolonial Criticism* from 2003). For a more general discussion of the dimensions of literature and aesthetics in the age of Theory, see *The Politics of Pleasure: Aesthetics and Cultural Theory* (edited by Stephen Regan), *The Question of Literature: The Place of the Literary in Contemporary Theory* (edited by Elizabeth Beaumont Bissell), as well as *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies* (edited by Michael Bérubé).

modernism – what he sees as a paradigm that is hegemonic in its organising principles, and which has monopolised literary, technical effects that are claimed to be subversive and transgressive. Equally, I follow in part Aijaz Ahmad’s critique of the ‘canonical status of modernism’ (Ahmad 2000, 124) as a legislative paradigm monopolising a ‘correct’ version of the postcolonial text that raises canonised questions, while marginalising or excluding ‘texts which do not ask those particular questions in any foregrounded manner’ (ibid.).<sup>9</sup> As will become clearer during the course of my argument, I am using the adjective ‘modernist’ rather than ‘postmodernist’ (although the way it is used suggests a number of overlaps), primarily because I want to include *both* postmodernist- and poststructuralist-oriented postcolonial criticism, *and* Marxist-materialist-oriented versions of the postcolonial perspective, two positions often formulated as oppositions, but nonetheless both inspired by many of the practices and assumptions developed within modernist discourse.<sup>10</sup>

Modernist discourse is a notoriously large and confusing category, encompassing much of what has generally come to pass for ‘serious literature’ in the twentieth century – from avant-garde, postmodernism, and even realism.<sup>11</sup> Any clarification on this issue will not be offered here; rather, what the modernist ethos should refer to is what I see as the uncritical *fetishisation* of characteristically modernist literary techniques (e.g. linguistic self-consciousness, formal disruption, and so forth),

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<sup>9</sup> The way in which I use the notion of ‘the modernist ethos’ should also be seen as similar to what Fredric Jameson has criticised as the ‘ideology of literary modernism’. Modernism, Jameson argues, has basically subsumed the notion of the literary as such; literature has come to designate ‘simply modernism’ (Jameson 2002b, 210).

<sup>10</sup> For a critical discussion of the complex relationship between modernism and postmodernism, see in particular Andreas Huyssen’s book *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. For a critical discussion of the equally complex relationship between modernism and Marxism, see Eugene Lunn’s *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno*.

<sup>11</sup> See Astradur Eysteinnsson’s comprehensive discussion of the many versions of modernism in *The Concept of Modernism*.

as these are seen as the equivalents to specific political values of the postcolonial imperative *as such*. Here I want to stress that I am not criticising self-reflective modernist textuality in itself, but rather the uncritical *fetishisation* of this practice within a postcolonial perspective. Thus, my notion of the modernist ethos does not include an acceptance of Fredric Jameson's claim that postmodernism is a commodified version of what was once modernist avant-garde, that is, the thesis that postmodernism is modernism but 'integrated into commodity production' (Jameson 1999, 4). Nor does the modernist ethos refer to the formula, particularly dominant among anti-formalists, that 'the more complex the language, the narrower its social impact' (Marx 2005, 8).<sup>12</sup>

The modernist ethos thus designates a deliberately broad notion that I will return to at various points in the following, and which I will use to analyse what I see as a characteristic ambiguity within postcolonial literary criticism. This ambiguity can be illuminated in the following way; in the light of what Martina Michel has listed as characteristic traits of contemporary texts (e.g. 'experimental', 'ironic', 'open-ended', 'intertextual') that are seen as representative of postcoloniality, postcolonial texts that do not show these traits in any foregrounded manner may come across as conventional and outmoded.<sup>13</sup> Insofar as these texts *have* been discussed as positive examples of postcoloniality, I would argue, postcolonial critics have tended to ignore questions of form, style, and rhetoric altogether (thus avoiding seeing these texts as outmoded from a

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<sup>12</sup> Astradur Eysteinnsson has argued, rightly I believe, that although realism generally tends to reinforce capitalist ideology (through the reproduction of its narratives and symbolic orders), this does not necessarily mean that it cannot be critical at the same time; conversely, 'modernist resistance by itself by no means ensures critical posture' (Eysteinnsson 1990, 208n), as assumed by many postcolonial critics.

<sup>13</sup> As Gerald Graff has argued, regarding anti-realist arguments more broadly in literary studies, there is often a very strong moralisation involved in attacks on conventional-realist representations, programmatically dividing certain anti-realist assumptions as being 'good' per se while others are being deemed 'bad' per se (see Graff 1979, 22-24).

formal point of view),<sup>14</sup> while instead focusing on extra-literary matters. Influenced, in a negative way, by a modernist ethos, postcolonial critics have thus tended to be suspicious of a focus on literary form regarding so-called conventional texts. Simultaneously with this tendency, one finds in postcolonial criticism a more positive influence of the modernist ethos at work in connection with experimental texts which in *formal* ways seem to formulate subversive strategies of resistance. 'Form', however, is perhaps not the most frequently used word any more, as John Carlos Rowe has pointed out: today 'form' seems to connote 'a transcendental essence', thus implying 'certain undesirable *metaphysical* and *ontological* associations from Plato to Kant' (Rowe 1990, 25). What has happened, Rowe argues, is that form has been exchanged with 'structure' (or 'text' in the poststructuralist sense), which, as W.J.T Mitchell has observed, emphasises 'the artificial, constructed character of cultural forms and defuses the idealist and organicist overtones that surround the concept of form' (Mitchell 2003, 321).<sup>15</sup> As such, there is no doubt that although extra-literary aspects have tended to dominate critical analyses, textual-literary aspects seem equally to have been addressed in postcolonial studies. And yet one should hesitate at this stage before reaching such a conclusion. As John Brenkman has observed, the contemporary discourse of gender/race/class criticism suffers from a 'loss of form' precisely because it has tended

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<sup>14</sup> In the essay 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', Fredric Jameson committed precisely this cardinal sin, arguing that 'The third-world novel will not offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce' (Jameson 1986, 65). Often misread, Jameson's essay has been exposed to an unusually vehement tide of critiques ever since it was published in 1986, perhaps most emblematically in Aijaz Ahmad's essay 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory"'.

<sup>15</sup> Agreeing with John Carlos Rowe's argument that 'structure' has replaced 'form' in contemporary literary criticism, W.J.T. Mitchell still finds the concept of 'form' necessary (and different from 'structure'); according to Mitchell, 'formalism insists on paying attention to a way of being in the path rather than to where the path leads', and, as such, 'a commitment to form is also finally a commitment to emancipatory, progressive political practices united with a scrupulous attention to ethical means' (Mitchell 2003, 324).

to focus on the literary text's 'network of signifiers in search of its purported representation', while primarily identifying 'social contents and political context' (Brenkman 2003, 120). One could see this 'loss of form' as particularly evident in that kind of postcolonial criticism which apparently engages with formal aspects of the literary text, performing what I see as a 'tacit', allegorising leap – the uncritical assumption that a set of politically subversive concepts somehow corresponds positively to formal disruption, meta-fictive strategies, labyrinths of narrative structures and so forth, i.e. what I call the modernist ethos.<sup>16</sup>

These two approaches to literary texts embody what I see as an ambiguity in much postcolonial literary criticism, or, what one could see as a kind of schizophrenia – that is, a textual approach to allegedly 'experimental' texts, and a thematic, content-based approach to so-called 'conventional' texts.<sup>17</sup> Characteristic for both approaches is what I see as a tacit consensus about the potential of the literary, a consensus which more concretely is expressed through either a *neglect* of form, or a *prescriptive* and *pre-critical* notion of literary form; in both approaches, however, the potential of the literary is primarily decoded according to a barometer of extra-literary criteria.

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<sup>16</sup> Seen as such, the modernist ethos functions in a similar way to what John Frow (after Arjun Appadurai) calls a 'regime of value', which more precisely implies a set of 'mechanisms that permit the construction and regulation of value-equivalence, and indeed permit cross-cultural mediation' (Frow 1995, 144). See also Appadurai (1986), Huggan (2001), and Frow (2005) for further discussions of 'the regime of value'.

<sup>17</sup> I have attempted to outline these two approaches as crudely as possible without simplifying their main characteristics, in order to illuminate some of the problems a return to the study of form may imply. One could argue that the content-based approach would be more characteristic of earlier forms of postcolonial criticism, whereas later forms of postcolonial criticism could be seen as more open to the textual approach. Seen within this perspective, the two approaches are not so much complementary as mutually excluding one another, in the sense that poststructuralist-oriented postcolonial criticism for example has often criticised the content-based postcolonial reading strategy for operating with a naïve, mimetic-representational model, whereas the latter has often accused poststructuralist-oriented postcolonialism for ignoring questions of history and materially determining forces. However, the implications of these theoretical concerns go beyond what I have labelled here as 'earlier' and 'later' forms of postcolonial criticism.

To illuminate this problematic further, I briefly want to use Marxism again as a comparative background. Discussing the revalorised status of modernism within the field of Marxism, Franco Moretti notes a certain loss of distance between Marxist interpretative theories (Marxist criticism inspired by for example Bakhtin's work, Russian Formalism, and deconstruction) and their favoured ('experimental' or 'open') literary texts, both belonging to what he sees as a modernist paradigm, and thus together producing a kind of hermeneutical blindness, or an 'interpretive vicious circle' (Moretti 1988, 339). Within this perspective, Moretti argues, Marxism has come close to resembling an 'Apology for Modernism' (ibid.). Whereas for Adorno and Benjamin, 'open' or 'fragmented' texts were associated 'with melancholy, pain, defenselessness, and loss of hope' (ibid.), such texts would today 'suggest the far more exhilarating concepts of semantic freedom, detotalization, and productive heterogeneity' (ibid.). What troubles Moretti, however, is that the indeterminacy, plurality, irony and ambiguity of modernist texts are often seen as 'valuable *as such*, not as a starting point from which to move toward a definite choice' (340-341). By focusing on the absence of a movement toward a 'definitive choice', Moretti points at the effects of this 'interpretive vicious circle', namely what he sees as a spell of *indecision*. The dominating view that 'modernist literature is subversive of the modern bourgeois worldview' (339) appears to Moretti as a rather unconvincing argument:

There is no doubt that "open" texts contradict and subvert organicistic beliefs, but it remains to be seen whether, as is now widely and uncritically assumed, in the past century the hegemonic frame of mind has not in fact abandoned organicism and replaced it with openness and irony. (ibid.)

The promotion of indecision as a literary quality or value, in its own right, is ultimately what Moretti sees as an expression of the ‘complicity between modernist irony and indifference to history’ (343).

If we turn to the field of postcolonial literary criticism, Moretti’s reflections in many ways correspond to what I referred to before as a problematic leap operating in many analyses of postcolonial texts; this leap implies an automatic equation of formal heterogeneity, innovation, and originality with political radicalism, which in this sense provides a set of implicitly valorised aesthetic codes that is simultaneously followed by a more hesitating willingness to engage with the aesthetics of allegedly more conventional modes of expression. The direct implications of this problematic are, I believe, partly reflected in the remarkably narrow list of postcolonial canonical works, that is, works being discussed, studied and taught in departments of postcolonial studies, of which, as Neil Lazarus polemically has argued, the example *par excellence* must be Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*: ‘I am tempted to overstate the case, for purposes of illustration, and declare that there is in a strict sense only one author in the postcolonial literary canon. That author is Salman Rushdie’ (Lazarus 2005, 424). That many postcolonial critics continuously reread and repeat their points about this novel, rich in stylistic and formal inventions, together with a handful of other recurring works, seems to exemplify the discrepancy, or perhaps even to some extent incompatibility, between the norms of many sections within the field of postcolonial studies, and a large part of what can be labelled as postcolonial literature;<sup>18</sup> that is, an incompatibility which is

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<sup>18</sup> In W.J.T Mitchell’s view, today’s most important literary theories are produced in the west, while the most exciting literatures stem from the west’s former colonies (see Mitchell 1992, 14). Although it is a somewhat crude simplification of the problematic relationship between theory and literature (which Mitchell himself admits), I agree with Huggan’s comment on Mitchell’s argument that ‘it seems worth

based on an institutionalised act of *exclusion*, covered up by a ritualised and formulaic ‘radical’ practice.<sup>19</sup>

Postcolonial critics who eschew an engagement with literary form or structure, on the other hand, tend to prefer a novel like Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Both Achebe and Rushdie’s novels seem to fulfil a set of generalised expectations, either negatively or positively influenced by a modernist ethos, of what constitute radical postcolonial values as conveyed through literary texts.<sup>20</sup> To elaborate on Lazarus’ ‘overstatement’, I argue that insofar as postcolonial critics emphasise *formal* or *rhetorical* aspects as literary values, these values are to a large extent decoded in ‘prescriptive’ terms, such as allegorical tropes of modes of resistance, subversion and emancipation, whereas insofar as critics stress more thematic and sociological aspects of literary texts, there is a tendency to decode literary values in more ‘descriptive’ terms, i.e. terms such as authenticity and representativity (in the political sense). I put the words ‘prescriptive’ and ‘descriptive’ in quotation marks as they should not be

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questioning the neo-imperialist implications of a postcolonial literary/critical industry centred on, and largely catering to, the West’ (Huggan 2001, 4). In a recent roundtable discussion published in the journal PMLA, Simon Gikandi has argued that it is a ‘universally acknowledged fact that many of the critics who are unhappy with postcolonial theory point to its failure to account for the foundational literary texts of the colonial experience and the epistemology of decolonization or to engage with literatures produced in indigenous languages’; what is needed, according to Gikandi, is ‘a rethinking of the relation between theory and literature and a reflection on postcoloniality as an epistemological project’ (Yaeger 2007, 636). This process of rethinking, I think, is central to an argument for a return to the literary in postcolonial studies.

<sup>19</sup> Deepika Bahri, on the other hand, argues that it is necessary to engage critically with the ‘successful’, prize-winning postcolonial text, even if it is to some extent complicit with the process of global commodification: ‘It is no less important to refuse to cede this text either to reactionary, nonmaterialist, apolitical aesthetics, or to an ineffectually diluted metropolitan political correctness, or indeed to an unimaginatively constrained conception of political value’ (Bahri 2003, 3). An engagement with the aesthetic dimension, Bahri argues, would problematise the automatic assumption that a text may be irrelevant as a radical project insofar as it is popular, or the assumption that a text may be inherently radical ‘by virtue of category alone’ (7).

<sup>20</sup> At the same time, it is not my purpose to argue that these studies, discussing either modernist formal traits in literary works or political aspects, have only marginal importance, quite the contrary; what I am interested in, however, is to show and discuss what implications are involved in using literary texts in the way they have been within the field of postcolonial studies.



understood as absolute, distinctive procedures, but rather as indications of the parameters of extra-literary values underlying both perspectives.<sup>21</sup> The presence of the extra-literary is of course, for obvious reasons, unavoidable in any form of literary criticism; it would be counter-productive to debunk forms of literary criticism focusing on extra-literary aspects, while fetishising a notion of literary form. However, in terms of what I have referred to as the schizophrenic perspective of postcolonial literary criticism, it is necessary to explore more specifically the ways in which literary texts have come to occupy such an ambiguous position in postcolonial studies; why literary texts have been treated in this schizophrenic way, and the consequences of this treatment.

### **The Postcolonial Perspective<sup>22</sup>**

In an editorial to an issue of the journal *Postcolonial Studies*, Amanda MacDonald presents a series of questions directed toward the critical perspective of postcolonial studies: ‘does postcolonial studies really know, in a methodologically and/or theoretically sustained manner, why it matters to pay attention to particular representations or to representation as a category of phenomenon?’, and a little later: ‘does it understand the relationship between sign-system effects and the effects of power that it describes? Has it sufficiently refined its taxonomy of powers? Has it overlooked some types of potency in its preoccupation with Power?’ (MacDonald 2004,

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<sup>21</sup> Focusing on cosmopolitanism, Timothy Brennan has observed what he sees as a ‘set of doctrinal demands for the “third-world” writer’ (Brennan 1997, 36), that is, demands developed in terms of the prescriptive conditions imposed by cultural- and postcolonial studies.

<sup>22</sup> While referring to ‘the postcolonial perspective’ may suggest a coherent, unified field, which is obviously not the case, this section, however, will mainly attempt to demonstrate a general set of characteristic features across the disciplinary disagreements which should guide us toward the possibility of resituating the importance of the literary in a contemporary context.

254). MacDonald's questions characteristically evoke an aspect which I believe has always formed a fundamental part of the discipline; a sustained process of introspection, self-scrutiny, and self-criticism. Although one may object that self-criticism is an integrated part of *any* contemporary critical theory intervening in the discursive field of knowledge,<sup>23</sup> postcolonial criticism seems to define itself, or situate itself from the outset, as an imperative, constantly demanding a *rethinking*, such as Homi Bhabha phrases it in *The Location of Culture*: 'The postcolonial perspective forces us to rethink the profound limitations of a consensual and collusive "liberal" sense of cultural community ... The very language of cultural community needs to be rethought from a postcolonial perspective' (Bhabha 2004, 251). In Bhabha's view, the 'postcolonial' designates first of all, from an overall point of view, a constitutive critique of static, binary conceptualisations of hegemonic cultural paradigms. It is a critique which thus necessarily must imply a constantly renewed self-critique.

Self-reflexivity and self-critique may, however, also be seen as an expression of a paralysing paranoia within postcolonial studies, a field anxious not to reproduce imperialist ideologies and new orientalisms.<sup>24</sup> Rey Chow has, within the context of

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<sup>23</sup> Following the postmodern analysis Lyotard proposes in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* from 1979, one may see the necessity of self-criticism within any contemporary critical paradigm as both the acknowledgement of the absence of a stable, transcendental knowledge, and the attempt to develop a situated, local strategy of re-negotiating the discursive figures from inside: 'Postmodern science – by concerning itself with such things as undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, "*fracta*," catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes – is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical. It is changing the meaning of the word *knowledge*, while expressing how such a change can take place. It is producing not the known, but the unknown. And it suggests a model of legitimation that has nothing to do with maximised performance, but has as its basis difference understood as paralogy' (Lyotard 1991, 60).

<sup>24</sup> Given its relatively brief history as an academic discipline, it is remarkable how much the field of postcolonial studies has revolutionised humanities. One of the reasons for this remarkable rise is no doubt postcolonial studies' identity as a radical break from previous discourses; yet to claim such an identity as a 'radical break' is simultaneously to debunk, or partly debunk, previous discourses, from which the postcolonial perspective claims to be different in a radical way. This has of course produced many enemies of postcolonial studies, throwing suspicion on the ways in which the postcolonial perspective

ethnographic studies, criticised the tendency to constantly call ‘for the necessity of discursive self-reflexivity ... since such a call only confirms, once again, what was long ago established by Hegel as the distinguishing trait of Western Man, his capacity for being aware of himself’ (Chow 1995, 179-180). While self-reflexivity may be a necessary component within any contemporary radical perspective, there is a tendency to see it as a value *in itself*, similar to Moretti’s critique of ‘indecision’ as a fetishised literary value in its own right, that is, valuable according to uncertain parameters measuring what is allegedly subversive and transgressive. As such, to argue for self-reflexivity may to a certain extent be seen as *legitimising*, in an instrumental, habitual and uncritical way, the complex and ambiguous task of producing a radical counter-paradigm of knowledge, the sustained attempt to identify a functional critical perspective, anxious to avoid overlooking any ‘types of potency’, to reuse Amanda MacDonald’s phrase.<sup>25</sup>

These reservations would thus demand a further investigation of the methodological imperatives of postcolonial studies, legitimised through the constantly reiterated process of self-reflexivity. Discussing the geographical implications underlying much postcolonial theory, roughly divided between a desire of coming to terms with the burden of formulating a voice, speaking on behalf of ‘Third World

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legitimises itself as a radical break, yet what is perhaps most surprisingly is that many of these critics of postcolonial studies are to be found within the field itself. In Graham Huggan’s view, the excessive amount of self-criticism in postcolonial studies is an expression of what he sees as a ‘defensiveness’, which ‘has been part of the price the field has paid for achieving increasing institutional visibility’ (Huggan 2001, 258).

<sup>25</sup> Adding another problematic to this issue, Alison Donnell has argued that ‘A declaration of limits can actually work as a legitimisation device’ (Donnell 1995, 106); discussing the positioning identities of reader and writer, Donnell warns that although an awareness of such positionings is important, it ‘should not be reduced to competition, with readings of postcolonial texts developing into a bidding system in which cultural and ideological credentials are listed as the markers for deciding who can claim the most “authentic” ownership of meaning’ (ibid).

identities', while at the same time, and necessarily so, reconfiguring epistemological structures within western discourse, John K. Noyes asks:

If the postcolonial turn involves the unsettling of a certain critical tradition in the (primarily American) academies of higher education by insisting on the experience of the rest of the world, a world condemned to the ghostlike existence of the speechless, then for intellectuals working far from the center of tradition a number of obvious questions arise: what does this shift in perspective mean for the rest of the world? If the first world intellectual needs to imagine a perspective outside the first world in order to articulate the aporia of traditional theory, how does this position relate to the third world intellectual? Is postcolonialism a mask for the perpetuation of intellectual imperialism? (Noyes 2000, 352)

Echoing some of the accusations which in particular Aijaz Ahmad has directed toward the theoretical discourses of Said and Jameson, Noyes raises a number of important aspects, which are all located at the centre of what one may call the self-reflexive identity-formation of postcolonial studies.

One of these aspects, as implied in the quotation above, is the vital debate in postcolonial studies about its links with western theoretical formations such as post-structuralism, postmodernism and Marxism. There is no doubt that these 'isms' have provided the field of postcolonial studies with some of its most important theoretical concepts, but – as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin write in *The Empire Writes Back* – to appropriate western theories also involves a series of dangers,

the most threatening of which is the tendency to reincorporate post-colonial culture into a new internationalist and universalist paradigm. This incorporative practice is shared by both the apparently apolitical and ahistorical theories of poststructuralism and the socio-cultural and determinist theories based in contemporary Marxist thought. (Ashcroft, Griffith, Tiffin 2002, 154)<sup>26</sup>

In the attempt to avoid the clear-cut binary model of the oppressor versus the oppressed, Deepika Bahri argues that 'an incipient discourse may be permitted some conceptual

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<sup>26</sup> For 'materialist' postcolonial perspectives, see in particular the works of Neil Lazarus and Benita Parry. Simon During, on the other hand, endorses the conflation of postmodernism (as distinct from postmodernity) and postcolonial studies insofar as such a perspective would be capable of preserving difference, while at the same recognising the problematic task of registering otherness (see During 1987, 32-47). I will discuss more thoroughly the relations between postcolonial studies, poststructuralism and the literary in chapter two.

licence and flexibility in using conflicting models'; at the same time, Bahri continues, 'the failure to theorize scrupulously its own contradictions may ... limit its potential' (Bahri 1996, 152). In other words, because the field of postcolonial studies is a relatively new academic discipline, its use of conflicting models can in Bahri's view be excused as long as it continues to be self-reflective.

As we saw above, Homi Bhabha's work, most notably perhaps, represents a self-reflexive position which emphasises both the *historical* and the *political* dimensions of a poststructuralist and postmodernist perspective, in the attempt to counter discourses of Eurocentric, essentialist, objectifying and universalist thinking.<sup>27</sup> While constantly interrogating structures of referentiality and constructions of subjectivities and identities, Bhabha concedes that post-structuralism and postmodernism confined within their narrow European outlook have limited importance as such; their 'actual' radical potential is only activated from a postcolonial perspective:

the postcolonial prerogative seeks to affirm and extend a new collaborative dimension, both within the margins of the nation-space and across boundaries between nations and peoples. My use of poststructuralist theory emerges from this postcolonial contramodernity. I attempt to represent a certain defeat, or even an impossibility, of the 'West' in its authorization of the 'idea' of colonization. Driven by the subaltern history of the margins of modernity – rather than by the failures of logocentrism – I have tried ... to revise the known, to rename the postmodern from the position of the postcolonial. (Bhabha 2004, 251-252)

This perspective, however, has led to certain worries among other 'third-world' theorists, subscribing to a more materialist perspective, such as Arif Dirlik, who considers Bhabha 'a master of political mystification and theoretical obfuscation, of a reduction of social and political problems to psychological ones, and of the substitution

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<sup>27</sup> By referring to 'poststructuralism' and 'postmodernism' simultaneously, I am not suggesting that they can seamlessly be conflated, but rather that their shared features contribute to the overall version of Bhabha's postcolonial perspective. For a critical discussion of the differences between postmodernism and poststructuralism, see Christopher Norris' *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*. For a critical survey of the troubled relationship between postcolonial studies and poststructuralism, see Huggan (2001); 228-264

of post-structuralist linguistic manipulation for historical and social explanation' (Dirlik 1994, 333n). Not only is Bhabha's position, according to Dirlik, more or less complicit with the hegemonic structures of western epistemology, the discipline of postcolonial studies itself is repetitive and irrelevant since its underlying premises, 'such as the repudiation of post-Enlightenment metanarratives, were enunciated first in post-structuralist thinking and the various postmodernisms that it has informed' (336). That is to say, the underlying premises of postcolonial studies, in Dirlik's view, are basically variations of the postmodernist perspective – a phenomenon of global capitalism – which means that the field is unable to transgress its Eurocentric borders.<sup>28</sup> The outcome, then, is a theoretical discourse producing *exclusions* rather than *inclusions*; ideological distortion and reification rather than actual hybridity or in-betweenness; a postmodernist game in disguise playfully mimicking a radical political perspective, while diverting attention away from its uneasy relations to the larger context of global capitalism by fetishising otherness in order to maintain a privileged position at the centre of metropolitan discourse.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Rephrasing Slavoj Žižek's critique of the poststructuralist notion of subjectivity, Sean Homer argues, similarly to Dirlik, that 'an anti-essentialist theory of fragmented subjectivity and multiple subject positions provide late capitalism with an intellectual justification for precisely that form of subjectivity most appropriate to meet the demands of a decentred, unstable and fluctuating global economy' (Homer 2001, 9). Likewise, Kumkum Sangari argues in the article 'The Politics of the Possible' that postmodernism generally must be seen as complicit with the social formation of the West, incapable of transgressing its Eurocentrism, even in its politically radical forms. Echoing Benita Parry's critique of Spivak and Bhabha in *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique*, Martina Michel has argued that 'Although poststructuralist criticism effectively has revealed mechanisms of marginalization, the concept of the fractured self (that much-celebrated protagonist of our postmodern society) has at the same time worked towards fixing the marginalized Other in this silenced position' (Michel 1995, 90).

<sup>29</sup> As an alternative to this impasse, Dirlik reiterates the fetish of critical self-reflexivity, suggesting that the 'global intelligentsia' – that is, postcolonial critics and 'third-world' theorists – must 'generate a thoroughgoing criticism of its own ideology and formulate practices of resistance against the system of which it is a product' (Dirlik 1994, 356). Dirlik's Marxist-materialist notion of self-reflexivity represents one end of an axis along which the poststructuralist notion of self-reflexivity represents the other, an axis that I questioned earlier; both can be seen as fetishising, legitimising, paranoid and ultimately arresting gestures that cover institutional blind spots. See also Stuart Hall's essay 'When was "The Post-colonial?" Thinking at the Limit' for a critique of Dirlik's attack on postcolonial studies.

While Arif Dirlik believes that the postcolonial prerogative is so heavily informed by western modes of thought that it is incapable of constituting a genuine critique, Robert Young has argued, with Jacques Derrida and others as examples, that it is impossible to discuss the origins of poststructuralist thinking without simultaneously referring to the political implications of colonialism and cultural otherness:

Those who reject contemporary postcolonial theory in the name of the 'Third World' on the grounds of it being western, however, are themselves in doing so negating the very input of the Third World, starting with Derrida, disavowing therefore the very non-European work which their critique professes to advocate. (Young 2001, 413)

Although both Dirlik and Young probably overstate their cases, each position can be seen as constituting opposite ends of an axis along which most claims for an alleged radicality are produced within the field of postcolonial studies, and along which one may also locate expressions of what I have seen as the schizophrenic relation to the dimension of the literary. On its own, the literary seems to occupy a marginal role within such perspectives represented by for example Young and Dirlik, but its *relational* function, as treated variously by different postcolonial theoretical approaches, constitutes an important symptomatic, which may direct us toward the point where the potential of the literary may play a vital role in connection with some of the current blind spots and impasses in the academic discipline of postcolonial studies.

Ever since the beginning of postcolonial studies, one of the major disciplinary challenges has consisted in answering the basic, self-reflexive question of what the 'postcolonial' might or might not imply, its imperatives, achievements, limits, legitimisation, complicity, departures, deviations, digressions, inconsistencies and so

forth;<sup>30</sup> a tendency, one may add, which seems to have become even more pertinent ‘at a time when the field is becoming rapidly entrenched in the academy as a discipline, and postcolonial theory begins to assume, incrementally, larger proportions’ (Bahri 1996, 139). These two aspects, growing institutional power and an excessive emphasis on self-critique and self-reflexivity, I will argue, can be seen as proportionally linked,<sup>31</sup> not only to each other in a mutually authorising construction, but also intimately linked to the figures of the literary. It is my argument that these links, in covert and overt ways, are revealed exactly in the relationship between postcolonial studies and the literary or aesthetic as such.

### **Melancholic Self-Reflections**

In the introductory chapter to a collection of critical essays discussing contemporary postcolonial issues, Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks notes that the discipline seems to have reached a stage of ‘melancholia induced paradoxically by its new-found authority and incorporation into institutions of higher learning’. Contemporary postcolonial melancholia, Seshadri-Crooks argues, relates to a series of problems, such as:

postcolonial scholars’ apprehension that institutionalizing the critique of imperialism may render it conciliatory ... their criteria for political self-legitimation (i.e., the impossibility of representing the Third World as an anti-imperialist constituency, especially in the face of the retreat of socialism) and their peculiar immobility as an effective oppositional force for curricular change within (American and British) academies. (Seshadri-Crooks 2000, 3)<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See for example McClintock (1992), Shohat (1992), Mishra and Hodge (1993), Dirlik (1994), and Bahri (1996).

<sup>31</sup> Paul A. Bové writes: ‘When the tools of opposition ... lose their negative edge – when their critical edge makes no difference and they simply permit the creation of new texts, new documents recording the successful placement of the previously “oppositional” within the considerably unchanged institutional structures of the discipline – at that point criticism must turn skeptical again and genealogically recall how the heretical became orthodox’ (Bové 1990, 64) – hence explaining the proportional growth of self-reflexivity.

<sup>32</sup> Other critical studies addressing melancholia within a contemporary perspective include Judith Butler (1997), David Eng (2000), Slavoj Žižek (2000), Ian Almond (2004), and Paul Gilroy (2004). As these various studies demonstrate, the notion of melancholia has been used in a wide range of contexts and



In other words, at a time when postcolonial studies is enjoying wide academic success and popularity, there is a mounting sense among practicing critics that the discipline has become 'stereotyped as an acceptable form of academic radicalism' (17). One of the reasons underlying this development is what Seshadri-Crooks identifies as 'an inadequately enunciated notion of the margin' (4), that is, a margin which is different from multiculturalism's notion of a spatial, subject-positioned margin.<sup>33</sup> The uncritical and homogenising conflation of postcolonial studies and multiculturalism has among postcolonial critics led to what Seshadri-Crooks designates as a 'turf war', induced by an 'anxiety over the loss of the margin that results in the redrawing of lines and a struggle over the margin itself' (18). Postcolonial critics, Seshadri-Crooks argues, have been eager to recuperate the 'dislocated and authoritative *critical position*' (ibid.), desperately looking for radicality *as such*, and thus in effect fetishising and reifying the 'margin as the site of struggle for the outermost limit' (ibid.). Opposed to this undifferentiated notion of the margin, Seshadri-Crooks proposes a notion of postcolonial marginality 'not so much as that which is external to the power structure, but rather its constitutive outside, an intimate alterity that marks the limit of power' (13). To Seshadri-Crooks, this negative, ironic, and contingent dimension of marginality – as

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disciplines; what is *specific* about postcolonial melancholia, among other things, I would argue, is the field's extensive incorporation of other disciplinary practices and methodologies (and hence other disciplines' melancholic forms), as is evident in for example Gayatri Spivak's or Homi Bhabha's theoretical discourses.

<sup>33</sup> The notion of the margin in multiculturalism often constitutes, as Seshadri-Crooks puts it, a 'source of rejuvenation of the center, where knowledge as positive knowing is made possible' (Seshadri-Crooks 2000, 8), that is, a 'politics of recognition'. Michael Denning explains: 'It is here we find the struggles to reassert the dignity of despised cultural identifications: the assertion that black is beautiful, that gay and lesbian romance and sexuality are as central to our collective narratives ... as are heterosexual marriage and adultery, that art forms practiced by women are not "minor" forms, that speakers of minority languages have rights to cultural autonomy and representation' (Denning 2004, 164).

the incommensurable and irreducible remainder, the ‘unthought’, nonrecuperable otherness, or, ‘the residue of representation’ (ibid.) – must constitute the foundation of postcolonial ‘materialist critiques of power and how that power or ideology seeks to interpellate subjects within a discourse as subordinate and without agency’ (19).

One of the characteristic aspects of postcolonial studies as a theoretical field throughout its relatively brief span of history has been its amorphousness or shapelessness. And it is exactly this undefinability which to Seshadri-Crooks permits it ‘to be simultaneously self-critical and oppositional’ (ibid.), since it prevents the discipline from reaching a stagnant and self-complacent level of homogeneity. The continuation of this differentiated margin of postcolonial criticality and oppositionality is however only sustained through what Seshadri-Crooks sees as a *constant* rehearsal of the ‘conditions for the production of its own discourse’ (18), a ‘relentless self-scrutiny’; a ‘refusal to stay still, to define itself or defend itself’ (19).

The dimension of ‘consciousness-raising’ is according to Michael Denning ‘a virtue when it means a genuinely reflective sense of one’s own being, one’s own situation in the world, and one’s own impact on others’, thus an integral part of the ‘emergence of any social movement of subaltern peoples’ (Denning 2004, 126). As such, institutional and methodological self-criticism and oppositionality have, as I suggested earlier, always been an integrated part of postcolonial studies as an academic field. It is true that the danger of institutionalisation, which haunts the contemporary field of postcolonial studies in the age of global commodification, would seem to demand even more pronounced calls for self-criticality; but at the same time it may equally be relevant to see this demand *in itself* as something that has become a

fetishised, empty, and self-congratulating gesture – a theoretical short-circuit or impasse – playing a vital part in the process of contemporary melancholia. In other words, while the dimension of self-criticism or self-reflexivity seems to constitute a necessary disciplinary manoeuvre in postcolonial studies, it may simultaneously be conceived as a symptom of a certain methodological narcissism which legitimises, institutionally, an increasingly prescriptive framework that dogmatically maintains its position as *the critical position* in academia.

Seshadri-Crooks' critical essay constitutes in many ways an important theoretical symptom; while she accurately addresses some of the most serious, contemporary theoretical problems in the field, her own proposal of a radicalised notion of a postcolonial margin nevertheless relies on an equally fetishising idea of self-reflexivity, as the ultimately redemptive horizon of postcolonial criticality. But insofar as the excessive accentuations on self-criticality and self-reflexivity have become automatic, self-legitimising, disciplinary markers of an increasingly institutionalised and dogmatic methodological outlook – as attempts to repress the anxiety of a paralysing paranoia of reproducing imperialist ideologies and new orientalism, in order to maintain a radical identity – there is one important area, I believe, in which this melancholic problematic is noticeable in a very explicit way.

### **Postcolonial Studies and Literature**

This is more specifically the area in between postcolonial studies as a theoretical and academic field and postcolonial literary texts.<sup>34</sup> As I argued earlier, the postcolonial

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<sup>34</sup> Even if postcolonial theory repeatedly has attempted to move beyond pure literary criticism, it is still largely in the literary departments of academia that postcolonialism is being 'done'; outside this realm, it

text's clearly marked emphasis on a politicised mode of representing marginalised voices has vitalised the debate of what constitutes literary values, a debate which by now seems to be a finished chapter. There have been few attempts to recuperate an aesthetic-formal approach to literary texts in postcolonial studies, and as a consequence, one of the peculiar things about postcolonial criticism is, as Peter Hallward has observed,

how *little* it has to say about its own 'home' discipline, about literature proper. Having long since absorbed the boundary-blurring lessons of deconstruction, many postcolonial literary critics seem embarrassed by what remains of their disciplinary affiliation. Most postcolonial readings are brief, often insubstantial, sometimes simply anecdotal. Only rarely do such readings engage with a text 'on its own terms'. (Hallward 2001, 334-335)<sup>35</sup>

Hallward's comment is a serious indictment against the impetus of postcolonial studies, albeit also a very ambiguous one, since it raises the question as to what extent the dimension of the literary, *as literary*, that is, 'on its own terms', is supposed to play a role in a field which, according to Robert Young, has 'achieved a revolution in aesthetics and the aesthetic criteria of the literary, just at a moment when "the literary" was most under attack as an outdated category', since it is 'now valued as much for its

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would be legitimate to raise concerns as to how much impact the postcolonial framework has actually had. Ania Loomba may have a valid point that 'If postcolonial studies is to survive in any meaningful way, it needs to absorb itself far more deeply with the contemporary world' (Loomba 2002, 256) instead of merely fiddling with 'literatures written or translated into English' (257). In a longer perspective, I think Loomba's argument is of the utmost importance; in its present state, however, I would argue that postcolonial studies needs to return to an elaborate discussion of the literary, so as to be able to appreciate the potential of the literary and the specific ways in which literary texts may offer something valuable to the problematics of 'the contemporary world'.

<sup>35</sup> In the book *Absolutely Postcolonial*, Hallward distinguishes between the singular and the specific; postcolonial studies is a singular theoretical enterprise because it produces its own, self-validating value-system, while an actually *critical* – or specific – position includes norms and judgments that are produced outside its own regime of values. My argument about the ways in which literary texts have been used to 'confirm' the radical identity of the postcolonial could be seen as an example of such a singular enterprise.

depiction of representative minority experience as for its aesthetic qualities' (Young 1998, 7).<sup>36</sup>

In a world after the so-called 'revolution', the occurrence of melancholia as a symptom in postcolonial studies may be linked to the current status of the literary, given the fact that literature still occupies a substantial part of postcoloniality's objects of study, yet for reasons that are highly ambivalent.<sup>37</sup> As I noted earlier, postcolonial literary criticism seems to be characterised by what one may see as a kind of schizophrenia or dissociation; while many postcolonial literary analyses treat the literary work with an emphasis on its extra-literary qualities, the more aesthetically 'sophisticated' postcolonial analyses – those apparently taking literary form seriously – tend to focus primarily on works displaying 'extravagant innovation' (Parry 2002, 71), whereas more conventional modes of writing, 'deemed uncongenial to metropolitan taste are un-translated and largely un-discussed within the academies' (71-72). This would seem to suggest that the figures of the literary per se constitute a *problematic* within postcolonial studies, a problematic, to which the discipline in part has responded either through an unbalanced emphasis on allegedly radical textual modalities, or by ignoring literary form entirely. Simultaneously, and particularly in relation to the former kind of response, there has been a tendency in postcolonial studies to *repress* or *demonise* more conventional modes of writing apparently not distanced enough from

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<sup>36</sup> I am particularly indebted to Nicholas Harrison's edited volume *The Idea of the Literary* and Deepika Bahri's *Native Intelligence*, both referring to Robert Young's characteristic comment on the 'revolution' in the field of postcolonial studies (see Harrison 2005, 1 & Bahri 2003, 14), for my reflections on the aesthetic dimension in postcolonial theory.

<sup>37</sup> The occurrence of melancholia as a symptom in postcolonial studies, I argue, is to be registered *negatively*; that is to say, the source of melancholia in postcolonial studies can be observed through the often reductive, simplistic readings of postcolonial literature, which pay scant attention to formal-aesthetic concerns, or, at the other end of the schizophrenic axis along which much postcolonial criticism operates, readings which exaggeratedly and uncritically valorise modernist textual modalities at the expense of more conventional textual modalities.

imperialist ideology in a self-conscious way, such as realism, insofar as this kind of literature has been discussed *as* realism or realist form, and not treated as historical documents, that is, figures of the extra-literary.

Schizophrenia is thus one of the characteristics of contemporary postcolonial criticism that most distinctly expresses the ambivalent position occupied by the literary – an ambivalence related to the problematic of institutionalisation as well as what I earlier saw as a certain repetitiveness and predictability in many postcolonial literary analyses: ‘To read across postcolonial literary studies’, Neil Lazarus polemically argues, ‘is to find, to an extraordinary degree, the same questions asked, the same methods, techniques, and conventions used, the same concepts mobilized, the same conclusions drawn’ (Lazarus 2005, 424) – that is, aspects confined to a narrow political and thematic framework consisting of ‘representations of colonialism, nationhood, postcoloniality, the typology of rulers, their powers, corruption, and so forth’ (Ahmad 2000, 124).<sup>38</sup> In a similar vein, Deepika Bahri talks about ‘a web of professional practices that include publishing, book reviews, syllabus exchange, conferences’ which produces ‘a pattern of privileging texts more readily responsive to “authorized” questions and pedagogic imperatives’ (Bahri 2003, 10).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Although my focus in this dissertation is on literary form and the problematic role it plays within the contemporary field of postcolonial studies, I am also indirectly suggesting a series of other factors which may be taken into account in a discussion of some of the underlying reasons why postcolonial studies has become institutionalised, such as the one-dimensional focus on a very narrow historical framework (i.e. modern history), the dominating focus on a narrow geographical framework (i.e. the west and its former colonies), and a narrow linguistic framework (primarily English and French).

<sup>39</sup> One could of course object that Lazarus and Ahmad (and, by implication, my own position) draw a rather homogenised and monolithic picture of the field of postcolonial studies, its practices and methodologies, which does not take into account differences in terms of, say, regions, local histories, gender, language and so on. It would undoubtedly be possible to make a very important case for this; moreover, I think the objection would be compatible with my overall argument, which however, in this chapter, is concentrated around the notion of postcolonial melancholia as a symptom of the problematics, limitations, and possibilities inherent in the relationship between a given postcolonial theoretical

For a long time, Deepika Bahri observes, ‘it would have seemed provocatively conservative to agitate for aesthetic considerations’ (15), yet nevertheless there are a number of significant reasons suggesting that we need to reengage with the issue of the literary and the aesthetic in contemporary criticism. When postcolonial studies, after having ‘revolutionised’ the field of literary aesthetics through critical and politically consciousness-raising readings of texts previously situated comfortably within narrow, local frameworks,<sup>40</sup> is haunted by melancholia today because of a loss of critical marginality, this may be seen as an ambiguous expression of both disciplinary success and failure. Success, in the sense that an elaborated notion of the literary after the so-called postcolonial aesthetic ‘revolution’ has been utterly undermined; but also failure, implying that the contemporary field of postcolonial studies has lost its identity as a critical margin – that it has become something dangerously close to representing ‘a sales tag for the international commodity culture’ (Huggan 1994, 24).

### **Legitimisation and Repression**

‘Postcolonial discourse’, Fawsia Afzal-Khan observes, ‘will always be productively split between the assertion of its political convictions and the critique of those very convictions’ (Afzal-Khan 2000, 24). Insofar as the radicality of the political imperatives of postcolonial studies is constantly measured against the margins of this discontinuity, what seems to be one of the problematic consequences is that the *reinforcement* of this split – a reinforcement vital to the field as a critical, consciousness-raising discourse

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discourse and the figures of the literary, rather than an investigation of the ways in which this symptom is differentiated in particular practices, traditions and contexts.

<sup>40</sup> See in particular Jameson (1990), Said (1994), Chrisman (1998) and Parry (2004) for readings of colonial and imperial inscriptions in domestic fictions.

under increasing institutional pressure – has led to a displacement of the focus of postcolonial studies; a focus displaced *from* its object proper, the literary text, *to* its own figures of self-representation and self-critique, as a field distinct from other, related fields. It follows that the negative effects of this displacement become particularly evident in postcolonial discourse's relation to the figures of the literary.

*In A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing*

*Present*, Spivak argues that:

the promise of justice must attend not only to the seduction of power, but also to the anguish that knowledge must suppress difference as well as difference, that a fully just world is impossible, forever deferred and different from our projections, the undecidable in the face of which we must risk the decision that we can hear the other. (Spivak 1999, 199)

Insofar as we take this 'promise of justice' as one of the underlying constituents of the postcolonial political imperative, postcolonial literary analyses are confronted with the task of registering the otherness as conveyed in and through the literary. It is, however, possible, I believe, that the literary interpretative framework of postcolonial criticism, its 'incessant, self-reflexive analysis' (Afzal-Khan 2000, 24), may to a certain extent ward off the risk or potency involved in the task of *reading* literary texts, which thus perhaps rather appear in the form of the 'already-read'.<sup>41</sup> I want to argue that a certain act of 'illegitimate', 'concealed', or even 'borrowed' legitimisation takes place within

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<sup>41</sup> Jameson's much-criticised notion of the 'always-already read'-dimension of third-world literary texts (as national allegories) questions the possibility of a reading beyond ideologically inflected habits reinforced by a value-coded system in which novels that do not correspond to an institutionalised and pre-conceived set of literary norms are devalued *before* the integrity of the reader's proficiency is interrogated. What Jameson's essay on Third-world literature addresses is the appearance of a belatedness, a non-immediacy, of the postcolonial novel in the hands of a reader unfamiliar with its contexts of origins, as a text always-already interpreted within the category of nationalism. And it is exactly the impossibility of an attempt to move beyond this appearance of a belatedness, that is, to read the postcolonial novel 'on its own terms' (or, for that matter, to read *any* literary text 'on its own terms'), that leads Jameson to stress the futility in an evaluation of this genre through traditional aesthetics: 'The third-world novel will not offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce' (Jameson 1986, 65). See also McGonegal (2005) for a reading of the 'always-already read' dimension in Jameson's work.



much postcolonial criticism, increasingly stereotyped and institutionalised through a narrow, authoritative vocabulary, frequently consisting of ‘the hybrid, the interstitial, the intercultural, the in-between, the indeterminate, the counter-hegemonic, the contingent’, that is, ‘attempts to evoke that which no concept can “capture”’ (Hallward 2001, xi). The sustained attempt to constitute itself conceptually as the discipline no one can ‘capture’, may also be seen as a process of legitimising itself as the (authoritatively de-legitimising) discipline capturing or representing that margin which no concept can ‘capture’. One may see this tautological self-authorisation, which is paradoxically exposed in the relationship to the figures of the literary, as an expression of postcolonial studies’ contentious location in between cultural meta-languages of knowledge.<sup>42</sup>

It is in this way that the excessive self-critique, which in an obligatory way seems to authorise many postcolonial analyses of literary works, is intimately related to the aspect I stressed earlier, namely the lack of attention to the specifically literary in much postcolonial literary criticism. The specifically literary, the literary text ‘on its own terms’, across the spectrum of different modes, thus seems to imply a relationship involving an uncanny risk; a risk to which postcolonial literary criticism has responded in a schizophrenic way, either by ignoring this risk through an emphasis on the extra-literary dimension of the literary work or through an emphasis on excessively self-conscious modes of literary expressions that correspond to the radical figures of the postcolonial political imperatives.

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Stephen Slemon’s and Helen Tiffin’s argument that ‘When reading for textual resistance becomes entirely dependent on a “theoretical” disentanglement of contradiction or ambivalence within the colonialist text – as it does in deconstructive or new historical readings of colonial discourse – then the actual locus of subversive agency is necessarily wrenched away from colonised or post-colonial subjects and resituated within the textual world of the institutionalised western literary critic’ (Slemon & Tiffin 1989, xviii; also quoted in Moore-Gilbert 2000, 18-19). For a discussion of the institutional framework of postcolonial studies and Foucault’s notion of ‘will to knowledge’, see Deepika Bahri (2003); 36

Here, I believe, we seem to arrive at the centre of what one may see as the dilemma of much postcolonial literary criticism, a dilemma which equally constitutes its potential; I am arguing that postcolonial studies, legitimising its methodological strategies through a self-critical practice of rereading (or a reading otherwise) the figures of the marginal, to some extent can be seen as a discourse producing a 'promise of justice' that merely functions as a rhetorical manoeuvre concealing its theoretical blind spots. To 'occupy a blind spot', Shoshana Felman writes, albeit in a different context, 'is not only to be blind, but in particular to be blind to one's own blindness; it is to be unaware of the fact that one occupies a spot within the very blindness one seeks to demystify' (Felman 1989, 199).<sup>43</sup> What one may see as anxiously concealed defence mechanisms (that is, the excessive self-critique) implemented to prevent falling into this hazardous trap, I argue, are revealed through what Hallward saw as the insubstantiality of many postcolonial literary analyses. One may thus argue that the radicalism of a large part of the established postcolonial theoretical vocabulary, with which the postcolonial critic 'answers' the demands of the literary text, is established at the price of the neutralisation of literary singularity, the reduction of critical responses to the 'brief, often insubstantial, sometimes simply anecdotal' – as answers answering *for* the text, whose figures thus become answerable to the particular figures of the postcolonial vocabulary.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> In her Lacanian-deconstructive-inspired essay 'Turning the Screw of Interpretation', Shoshana Felman argues that literature constructs a 'trap'; criticism attempts to master the meaning of the literary text, but thereby becoming trapped in a re-enactment of the figures of the text. The fear of entering this trap, I believe, is to a certain extent reflected in many postcolonial analyses of the literary, never quite willing to enter a position claiming the mastery of the text (that is, being caught in literature's trap), while instead engaging in a blinding process of 'mastering' their own blindness to which the literary becomes a guide, a reader, that is, a theoretical correction (caught in the trap of the postcolonial).

<sup>44</sup> Timothy Brennan argues that many contemporary, 'cosmopolitan', postcolonial writers 'have given their novels the unfortunate feel of ready-mades. Less about authenticity of vision than the context of

What Franco Moretti designates as the ‘loss of distance’ in modern criticism, and what Neil Lazarus conceives as a certain sameness in postcolonial literary analyses, can be seen as similar to the seamlessness of the correspondence between an explicitly self-conscious postcolonial literary modality on the one hand, and on the other hand the dominating vocabulary of much postcolonial literary criticism. Moreover, this seamlessness can thus be seen as contributing to the process of what Seshadri-Crooks viewed as the consolidation of an institutionalised, blunted and reified standard of radicalism, that is, a loss of a differentiated, critical margin.

It is in this sense that the literary may thus constitute an important resource simultaneously informing postcoloniality. Postcoloniality’s relationship to the figures of the literary, I would argue, may in part be seen as epitomising, in all its heterogeneity and complexity, both in a figurative and a literal sense, the uncanny *modus operandi* of the postcolonial perspective. The figures of the literary can be conceived as the potential revelation of the uncanny, blind spot of postcolonial studies, that which should have remained secret;<sup>45</sup> the figures of the literary may be seen as representing the (im)-possible or uncanny resource of the postcolonial perspective, indicating on the one hand that which *supports* the postcolonial perspective, and on the other hand indicating that which necessarily must remain *unreadable* within the figures of postcolonial criticism (i.e. the literary ‘on its own terms’). The literary text may in this sense be seen as the

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reception’ (Brennan 1997, 203) – that is, their *postcolonial* context of reception. One could modify Brennan’s perhaps rather cynical view via Graham Huggan’s argument that the contemporary postcolonial literary text ‘is profoundly affected, but not totally governed, by commodification; it is frequently, but not invariably, subject to fetishisation of cultural difference; it is increasingly, but by no means irredeemably, institutionalised in Western commercial and educational systems; its value is certainly shaped, but not rigidly determined, by its contact with the global market’ (Huggan 2001, 27).

<sup>45</sup> As Peter Childs and Patrick Williams remind us, ‘it was the literatures of former colonies which were originally designated post-colonial’ (Childs & Williams 1997, 20), whereas postcolonial theorists today, according to Peter Hallward, ‘seem embarrassed by what remains of their disciplinary affiliation’ (Hallward 2001, 335).

uncanny doppelganger of the postcolonial perspective – at one and the same time endowing postcolonial studies with the possibility of responding to otherness, but also exposing the field to a risk, namely the dissolution of its disciplinary boundaries, and hence the dissolution of its identity as an independent academic discourse.

### **The Melancholia of Postcolonial Studies**

Here I want to return to Seshadri-Crooks' reflections on the melancholia of contemporary postcolonial studies; what remains somewhat under-theorised and displaced in Seshadri-Crooks', in other respects balanced, overview of the impasses in postcolonial discourse, seems to be the possibility of conceiving the literary *as* the margin, 'the residue of representation', instead of the emphasis on a literature *of* the margin. The 'relentless self-scrutiny', the fear of becoming a petrified, homogeneous critical authority, and so on, which has always been a trademark of postcolonial studies as an academic discipline, may be, as Seshadri-Crooks argues, and undoubtedly many other postcolonial scholars will agree with her, seen as a continual attempt to preserve the margin, its distinct position of otherness, always under threat: 'The postcolonial margin must be acknowledged as incommensurable and nonrecuperable' (Seshadri-Crooks 2000, 13).

But I want to open the possibility of reading this trademark rather differently, by turning to Freud's essay on 'Trauer und Melancholie' from 1915. Freud sees the condition of melancholia as belonging to the group of manic-depressive psychoses, specified by its neurotic narcissism.<sup>46</sup> One of the preconditions for the possibility of

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<sup>46</sup> In the short article on melancholia, Freud notes how difficult it is to distinguish melancholia from mourning. He considers the former as distinct from other psychoses, like paranoia or schizophrenia, while

melancholia occurring at some later stage is the narcissistic choice of object; another is the ambivalence, that is, the love-hate relationship to the object. Melancholia is triggered by the loss of the object, or, the feeling of disappointment, of being let down by the object: 'melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious' (Freud 1968, 245). The libido is redrawn to the realm of the ego, which in effect leads to the ego-libido's attempt to identify with the object, that is, an attempt to restore the lost object within the ego.<sup>47</sup> Freud writes:

On the one hand, a strong fixation to the loved object must have been present; on the other hand, in contradiction to this, the object-cathexis must have had little power of resistance ... The narcissistic identification with the object then becomes a substitute for the erotic cathexis, the result of which is that in spite of the conflict with the loved person the love-relation need not be given up. (249)

This substitution, as Freud notes a few lines later, is equally an important mechanism in schizophrenia; it represents 'a *regression* from one type of object-choice to original narcissism ... The ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it' (249-250).

The identification of the ego with its lost object at the same time empties its libidinal energy: 'In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself' (246). Trapped within this contaminating or haunting condition of emptiness (that is, haunted by an absent object it can never quite *devour*, that is, *become* or *replace* through identification), the objectified ego develops a pathological distortion of self-understanding. The ego becomes the ghostly object of a

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defining melancholia negatively, as a kind of anomalous version of mourning (or, to put it differently, mourning is the 'normal' pathological reaction to a sense of loss). For a discussion of Freud's later developments of his theory of melancholia, see Tammy Clewell (2004).

<sup>47</sup> What Freud in his later meta-psychological writings calls 'introjection'.

helpless self-critique,<sup>48</sup> which however, as Freud notes, is not primarily directed toward the melancholic self, but rather toward the lost object with which the ego identifies, thus resentfully ‘revenging’ him- or herself on the missing object. ‘The complex of melancholia’, Freud writes, ‘behaves like an open wound’ (253), a schizophrenic revenge which at the same time implies a sadistic satisfaction:

The self-tormenting in melancholia, which is without doubt enjoyable, signifies, just like the corresponding phenomenon in obsessional neurosis, a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate which relate to an object, and which have been turned round upon the subject’s own self. (251)

Nourished by a sadistic, revengeful, yet fundamentally self-deluding and impoverishing *fantasy* of the ‘restored’ object, the melancholic ego must at the same time prevent, exclude or repress the possibility of the object *actually* returning, since this return would lead to an *uncanny* complication, and ultimately destabilisation, of the pleasure-giving process of substitution; the melancholic ego would in that case become the ghostly other of its own fantasy. The melancholic fantasy thus to some extent acts as a mechanism of repression or exclusion.<sup>49</sup>

From this brief outline, one may draw a connection between Seshadri-Crooks’ description of a relentlessly self-scrutinising discipline haunted by melancholia, and Freud’s thoughts on the process of a ghostly, cannibalistic identification, characteristic of the melancholic ego. As I stressed earlier, the discipline of postcolonial studies has

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<sup>48</sup> That is, the part of the ego which Freud in his article on narcissism from 1914 calls ego-ideal, and which he later designates as the *Über-Ich*.

<sup>49</sup> For a thought-provoking use of Freud’s essay on melancholia within postcolonial studies, see Anne Anlin Cheng’s *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* in which she uses the concept of melancholia to describe the processes of racial identification and identity-formation in an American context. As will become clearer in the following, I am using Freud’s notion of melancholia in a similar way, but in connection with what I see as the melancholic relationship between postcolonial literary criticism and the (lost or absent) object of the literary as a configuration of otherness – a margin through which postcolonial criticism has always identified itself, but which increasingly has become commodified due to increasingly institutionalised and prescriptive reading practices that have erased the specificity of the literary.

always been, and still is, closely tied to literary and aesthetic modes of representativity – a relationship, as we saw earlier, of ambivalence. Seshadri-Crooks notes that ‘Unlike other area studies, postcolonial studies has no identifiable object’ (Seshadri-Crooks 2000, 19), which in the Freudian perspective can be seen as both true and untrue at the same time – similar to the way in which the melancholic ego sadistically criticises him- or herself *as* the other, that is, as the restored object. The ‘amorphousness’ of postcolonial studies, that which ‘permits it to be simultaneously self-critical and oppositional’ (ibid.), has in itself become a fetish, a displaced libidinal energy, diverting attention from the object which *must* not be identified, in order to allow the discipline’s critical nexus to remain within a process of constant self-correction. The lack of an identifiable object, the ‘amorphousness’, can thus be seen as constituting postcoloniality’s own fetishised object, or, the attempt to restore the lost object within its own discourse, as its own discourse – the ‘incommensurable and nonrecuperable’ (13) dimension of otherness, that which simultaneously constitutes, but rarely is permitted the status of, the literary. The melancholic self-scrutiny of postcolonial studies, the self-correction, the sustained attempt to preserve within itself its object, as its object, may suggest that postcolonial literary texts have never quite managed to live up to the expectations of postcolonial studies – as ‘faulty’ or ‘outmoded’ relics, waiting to be converted to the radicalism that postcolonial criticism will enunciate on their behalf, ‘revenging’ the failures that the literary may represent.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> With the obvious exceptions which prove the rule, such as the works of Salman Rushdie or J.M. Coetzee, to name a few of the canonised postcolonial authors, works which speak *in tune*, or, *at level*, with the vocabulary of much postcolonial criticism. Insofar as one may see the literary as constituting an important component in the identity-construction of the postcolonial perspective, so-called radical texts *confirm* the radicality of the postcolonial perspective as an original value, an ideal, while so-called conventional texts can be seen as revealing an uncanny difference or incompatibility.

The continued, albeit ambiguous, centrality of literary texts within the field of postcolonial studies would however seem to suggest that the contemporary melancholia is perhaps rather triggered by the reverse – the dawning, melancholic awareness within much postcolonial criticism of its own failure, to never quite have been able to live up to the critical potential that the literary contains, the constitutive site of negative, contingent marginality; that it has never quite been able to *replace* it, to *identify* with it, to speak *as* the literary, despite all the attempts to silence it, to speak *for* it, to translate it into its own vocabulary. The current melancholia of postcolonial literary criticism is thus an expression of what one may see as the uncanny return of the literary,<sup>51</sup> no longer trapped within a narrow, local framework, but *as* the negative, homeless, borderless and contingent dimension of marginality which Seshadri-Crooks identifies as the critical postcolonial margin. ‘Notwithstanding all the legalistic efforts of literary criticism, literature remains’, Spivak observes, ‘the singular and unverifiable margin’ (Spivak 1999, 175).

Melancholia follows as a consequence of what Seshadri-Crooks sees as the danger of postcolonial studies, being institutionalised academically, gaining power as *the* authoritative, critical position, or, the position of the *Über-Ich* – one that definitively eliminates the illusion of identifying an authentic margin, however much it flagellates itself critically, that is, somewhat schizophrenically ‘revenges’ itself on its deceitful, distrustful object, the objectless object, which keeps resurrecting itself *as* otherness, or, *as* the literary. The literary thus, as I have argued, can be seen as representing an important problematic in postcolonial studies, registering the dialectic of institutional

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<sup>51</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between literature and the uncanny, see Nicholas Royle’s *The Uncanny*, and also Robin Lydenberg’s ‘Freud’s Uncanny Narratives’.



power and excessive self-critique as a process of legitimising the loss of a margin; it represents a risk, transgressing the discursive boundaries, but also a potential to move beyond the cul-de-sac of cultural incommensurability.

## Chapter Two

### The Return of the Literary

In the face of the abnormality into which reality is developing, art's inescapable affirmative essence has become insufferable. Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber. (Adorno 2004, 2)

In order to reclaim the role of teaching literature as training the imagination – the great inbuilt instrument of othering – we may, if we work as hard as old-fashioned Comp. Lit. is known to be capable of doing, come close to the irreducible work of translation, not from language to language but from body to ethical semiosis, that incessant shuttle that is a “life.” (Spivak 2003, 13)

#### Returning to the Literary

In the previous chapter, I attempted to raise some issues regarding the dimension of the literary in postcolonial studies. Tracing the contemporary atmosphere of melancholia, I tried to demonstrate a connection between what I saw as the *failure* of a large part of the typical postcolonial vocabulary, becoming increasingly institutionalised and thus occupying an uncomfortable degree of academic authority, to identify (with) its object of study *and* the remarkable emphasis on self-criticism and self-reflexivity. I suggested that this ‘misrecognition’ should be seen as intimately related to postcolonial studies’ ambiguous and anxious desire for legitimisation as a genuinely critical margin, a desire which by now

has become melancholic. Melancholia designates a growing awareness of the *problems* involved in the ways in which postcolonial studies has attempted to *satisfy* this desire – problems such as for example the ways in which literary texts have been read and used.

One of the responses to postcolonial melancholia today is thus what can be seen as a recent tendency among certain postcolonial scholars, namely a renewed interest in the literary dimension. Works such as Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (2003), Deepika Bahri's *Native Intelligence* (2003), Nicholas Harrison's *Postcolonial Criticism* (2003), Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* (2004) and J.M. Coetzee and *The Ethics of Reading* (2004), and Nicholas Brown's *Utopian Generations* (2005), all express unease about the ways in which literary texts have been treated in cultural studies and postcolonial studies (and perhaps literary studies in general), while offering vital attempts to reframe the potentials and implications of the aesthetic, as a way out of the contemporary debacle. The theoretical impulse of my own argument should be seen as part of this tendency; this chapter will elaborate detailed discussions of some of these recent critical works returning to the literary, in order to clarify both the basis on which my argument is situated, and where it takes a different path.

As will become clearer in the following, one of the problems, as I see it, emerging from these recent – and vitally important – attempts to rethink the literary within the context of cultural- and postcolonial studies is that they largely base their critical concerns on aesthetic-formal paradigms which to some extent fail to reach beyond what I earlier referred to as the modernist ethos (that is, the assumption of a correspondence between modernist aesthetic techniques and a vocabulary of radical, political concepts), in part because literary form – (the *literary* as distinct from the *extra-literary*) – is largely

conceived as quite simply meaning modernist aesthetic technique, that is, when the literary becomes visible as a *formal difference* within the text's codes of meaning. Part of what I call the modernist ethos should thus be seen as an attempt to identify the monopolising limits of a conception of the literary, and the implications of the impact that these limits may exert on an attempt to formulate a renewed importance of literary texts in postcolonial studies.

Overall, what I want to explore in this chapter is the extent to which recent arguments for a renewed attention toward the literary in a postcolonial context may involve another form of melancholia, not so much the *symptom* of – as much as a critical *response* to – disciplinary institutionalisation; a response which nonetheless still in effect maintains a narrow value-codification of the aesthetic that corresponds to, and thus legitimises, the imperatives of the postcolonial perspective (and, as such, reinforces the process of institutionalisation).

### **Marginality in the Marketplace**

Discussing an aspect of postcolonial literary criticism, which in recent years has become ever more noticeable, Graham Huggan's book *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* focuses on the extent of postcolonial studies' involvement in the contemporary commodification of marginality and cultural difference.

'Postcolonial studies', Huggan argues, 'has capitalised in its perceived marginality while helping turn marginality itself into a valuable intellectual commodity' (Huggan 2001, viii). One could object that such a view does not take into account the *critical* impact postcolonial studies has had on academic modes of thinking in general, and moreover

misses the fact that postcolonial studies, perhaps more than any other critical discourse, has always been conspicuously aware of this problematic (i.e. what I referred to earlier as the excessive amounts of self-criticism within the field). Yet Huggan's critique goes beyond the typical reductionist charges that have been directed toward postcolonial studies (i.e. postcolonial studies being no more than a lackey of global capitalism). Whereas for example Arif Dirlik, in the article 'The Postcolonial Aura', sees postcolonial studies as little more than a self-fixated form of academic careerism (with Homi Bhabha as an example),<sup>1</sup> Huggan insists on a radical ethos in postcolonial studies, although an ethos which nonetheless is intricately bound up with the logic of market forces. That is to say, the field of postcolonial studies has, in Huggan's opinion, not *only* operated as a discourse of resistance, but *also* as discourse mediating or marketing otherness as a commodity value on the global market.

In Huggan's view, this commodity value of otherness also has 'an aesthetic value, a value often measured explicitly or implicitly in terms of the *exotic*' (13). Whereas exoticism normally is understood as 'an aestheticising process through which the cultural other is translated, relayed back through the familiar', in a *postcolonial* context – 'exoticism is effectively *repoliticised*, redeployed both to unsettle metropolitan expectations of cultural otherness and to effect a grounded critique of differential relations of powers' (ix-x). And yet central to Huggan's argument is the foregrounding of the *ambiguity* of aesthetic value as understood in terms of the exotic.

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<sup>1</sup> Aijaz Ahmad raises a similar point in the essay 'Languages of Class, Ideologies of Immigration' in *In Theory*; 94. See also Anthony Kwame Appiah's derisive description of postcolonial studies in the book *In My Father's House*: 'a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained, group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery' (Appiah 1992, 240).

To Huggan, the postcolonial context constitutes a site of struggle between two different sets of value-codifications; that is, postcolonial studies' field of production is 'split' into two levels or two 'regimes of values', which Huggan refers to as 'postcolonialism' and 'postcoloniality' (similar to, albeit different from, the distinction between 'postmodernism' and 'postmodernity').<sup>2</sup> From an overall perspective, 'postcolonialism' embodies what most practitioners in the field would identify as their tasks, namely revaluing and rereading 'the signs of social struggle in the faultlines of literary and cultural texts' (6); 'postcoloniality', on the other hand, designates 'a value-regulating mechanism within the global late-capitalist system of commodity exchange' (ibid.). Seen as such, the two regimes of value are oppositions, struggling against each other, yet part of Huggan's argument is to suggest that they have become 'mutually entangled' (ibid.):

the point that needs to be stressed here is that postcolonialism *is bound up with* postcoloniality – that in the overwhelmingly commercial context of late twentieth-century commodity culture, postcolonialism and its rhetoric of resistance have themselves become consumer products. (ibid.)

Due to the increased canonisation, fetishisation and glamorisation of certain themes, issues, writers, forms and so forth, taking place within the field of postcolonial studies today, the radical split between postcolonialism, as an anti-colonial and anti-capitalist critique, and postcoloniality, as a market-driven mechanism of value-codification corresponding to the logic of global capitalism, is according to Huggan under erasure.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> According to Huggan, 'postcolonialism' 'shares some of *postmodernism's* relativistic preoccupations – with textual indeterminacy, the crisis of meaning, the questioning of the unitary subject ... Yet it does not, or at least does not aim to, share postmodernism's somewhat irresponsible lack of commitment, its self-regarding obsession with play, or its Eurocentric frame of reference. Postcoloniality, on the other hand, is largely a function of *postmodernity*: its own regime of value pertains to a system of symbolic, as well as material, exchange in which even the language of resistance may be manipulated and consumed' (Huggan 2001, 6).

<sup>3</sup> But even if the radical split between 'postcolonialism' and 'postcoloniality' is under erasure, Huggan's argument is *not* that postcolonial studies thus has 'sold out', so to speak (i.e. that 'postcolonialism' has

Huggan's focus on the ambiguous relation between 'postcolonialism' and 'postcoloniality' provides a timely and engaged analysis of the postcolonial margin, and, by implication, an important discussion of aesthetic value-codifications in postcolonial studies. And yet one of the major weaknesses in Huggan's argument stems precisely from a strategically limited conception of the aesthetic. The main thrust of Huggan's argument, as we have seen, is that 'postcolonialism' operates with a set of values, such as "resistance", "authenticity", "marginality" (29), which apparently designates 'a politics of value that stands in obvious opposition to global processes of commodification' (6); yet on another level, these values simultaneously 'circulate as reified objects in a late-capitalist currency of symbolic exchange' (29). There is, in other words, an ambiguous homology or correspondence between postcolonialism's set of values and postcoloniality's set of values, one that emerges precisely in relation to the aesthetic – as art works which on the one hand provide textual resistance, while on the other hand 'circulate as reified objects'. Yet by referring to 'the postcolonial exotic', as a means to analyse this ambiguous dimension of postcolonial art works, Huggan at the same time *frames* the aesthetic dimension in these works within a value-coded system, regulating equivalents between specific dilemmas and formulas of what is to be done: 'what is it possible for postcolonial writers/thinkers to *do* about the postcolonial exotic?' (32), Huggan asks, listing a number of *different* strategies and options (by which he evidently believes that he has avoided homogenising the postcolonial field of cultural production) which are nonetheless all formulated *in relation* to Huggan's theoretical (and to some extent homogenising) problematic. One thing is that Huggan's parameter of postcolonial aesthetics is limited to either playful, self-conscious or

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*become* 'postcoloniality'), but rather to stress how postcolonial studies – or 'postcolonialism' – has commodified the margin, and thus become entangled with what Huggan refers to as 'postcoloniality', precisely *because* of its desire for a critical margin.

‘strategic’ (or, one could add, poststructuralist or modernist) versions of exoticism, or versions more or less complicit with old-fashioned exoticist-orientalist aesthetics; another, and related, aspect is the conspicuous way in which Huggan attempts to tease out the *political* agenda (or the politics of exoticism at work) in aesthetic productions<sup>4</sup> – while at the same time operating with a tacit, pre-conceived and strategically limited notion of the *aesthetic* that supports and legitimises his overall critical aim.

*The Postcolonial Exotic* adds an important dimension to what I referred to as the modernist ethos, and yet uncritically accepts its monopolisation of the aesthetic-literary potential as well. As such, Huggan’s effort to analyse the impact of the contemporary forces of global commodification upon the field of postcolonial studies, on another level may be said to *increase* the erasure of the distinction between ‘postcolonialism’ and ‘postcoloniality’, ironically because of a strategically limited, or even commodified, notion of postcolonial aesthetic-literary potential, which allows him to believe that he has avoided, ‘to some extent’ (viii), some of the traps emerging from the relationship between postcolonial studies and the global market forces.

### **Can the Literary Speak?**

A more direct case for a renewed debate about the specificity of the literary and aesthetic dimension in postcolonial texts is offered in Gayatri Spivak’s *Death of a Discipline*, a book consisting of three revised pieces of her Wellek Library Lectures, originally delivered in

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<sup>4</sup> Huggan writes: ‘Exoticism describes a political as much as an aesthetic practice. But this politics is often concealed, hidden beneath layers of mystification’ (Huggan 2001, 14). One of Huggan’s arguments is to show that the politics of exoticism is ‘attractively packaged and, at the same time, safely contained’ (24) in aesthetic works.



2000.<sup>5</sup> Representing in some ways a conspicuous departure in Spivak's career,<sup>6</sup> Spivak outlines what seems to her to be the major objectives for literary studies at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The simple fact that Spivak, at this particular point in her career, takes up an institution like Comparative Literature, in order to promote (or rather save) some of its potentials, like the care for language, idiom, style, form, and the advanced techniques of reading texts closely in the original language, despite being a discipline 'out of joint with the times' (Spivak 2003, xii), deserves a few comments, I believe, and in the following I will briefly go through some aspects of Spivak's earlier critical occupations as a preliminary background that may illustrate the force of her arguments in *Death of a Discipline*.

Few postcolonial critics have taken up the question of the voice of otherness with more painstaking persistence than Gayatri Spivak. In her perhaps most famous essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' from 1988, Spivak ends her attack on certain versions of representational strategies within French post-structuralism (Deleuze and Foucault) with the gloomy conclusion that colonised subalterns are silenced through essentialised subject-positions, and hence possess no voice of their own.<sup>7</sup> This early essay's emphasis on the problematic representational positioning of the margin of subalternity, shares certain – melancholic – similarities with *Death of a Discipline*, although in the latter work the

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<sup>5</sup> Spivak's argument in *Death of a Discipline* was to some extent conceived as a critical challenge to the ideology of 'liberal multiculturalism' proposed in the third ACLA report, 'The Bernheimer Report, 1993: Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century' (Bernheimer 1995, 39-48). See Stephen Yao's essay 'The Unheimlich Maneuver' for a discussion of the differences between Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* and the Bernheimer-report.

<sup>6</sup> Or, as Nicholas Harrison argues, a return to issues with which Spivak was occupied while she was writing a thesis on W.B. Yeats (see Harrison 2005, 3). There are, however, also clear overlaps between the arguments about the literary proposed in *Death of a Discipline* and other, both contemporary and earlier, essays by Spivak, which are perhaps more representative of the postcolonial position for which she is most known.

<sup>7</sup> For a critical discussion and assessment of Spivak's famous essay and the responses it has caused, see the article 'Postcolonialism's Archive Fever' by Sandhya Shetty and Elizabeth Jane Bellamy.

emphasis is not so much on the *subject* as much as on the problematic representational positioning of the *literary* in postcolonial studies. The differences between ‘Can the Subaltern Speak’ and *Death of a Discipline* do not demonstrate some major, radical changes in the trajectory of Spivak’s career, but rather illustrate the development of a critical response to some of the problems that have emerged in the wake of postcolonial studies’ meteoric rise to fame over the last few decades.<sup>8</sup>

In an essay from 1991 on Coetzee and Defoe, Spivak discusses the meteoric fame of postcolonial studies, and what she sees as the dangers of commodifying the margin in (US) literary studies. The way in which non-western literature is being used by literary scholars, Spivak argues, often lacks specialist knowledge:

we tend to leave untouched the politics of the specialists of the margin – the area studies, anthropology, and the like. Third World studies ... become so diluted that all linguistic specificity or scholarly depth in the study of culture is often ignored. Indeed, works in poor English translation or works written in English or the European languages in the recently decolonized areas of the globe or written by people of so-called ethnic origin in First World space are beginning to constitute something called “Third World literature.” Within this arena of tertiary education in literature, the upwardly mobile exmarginal, *justifiably* searching for validation, can help commodify marginality. Sometimes, with the best of intentions and in the name of convenience, an institutionalized double-standard tends to get established: one standard of preparation and testing for our own kind and quite another for the rest of the world. (Spivak 1991, 154)<sup>9</sup>

One of the possible implications of this potential commodification of marginality through a differentiating double-standard is according to Spivak that ‘we are becoming complicitous in the perpetration of a “new orientalism”’ (Spivak 1990a, 222), insofar as we maintain a

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<sup>8</sup> One of the contradictions, as has often been pointed out, with Spivak’s argument in ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ is that while it stresses the radical silencing of the subaltern voice, it also formulates a notion of subaltern otherness which is too absolute; as such, it could be argued that Spivak merely reverses, albeit still maintains, ‘one of the most fundamental and enduring binary oppositions between the West and the Third World constructed by metropolitan forms of knowledge (such as Orientalism)’ (Moore-Gilbert 2000, 104). One might see Spivak’s focus in *Death of a Discipline* as a way of approaching a more nuanced notion of otherness, as conveyed in and through the figures of the literary. Spivak’s notion of the literary is equally one that shares a number of similarities with Derek Attridge’s theory of otherness and literature, which I will come back to later.

<sup>9</sup> One could also argue, as Aijaz Ahmad does, that what Spivak refers to as ‘something called “Third World literature”’ is rather what *used* to be known as “Third World Literature”, and which ‘gets rechristened as “postcolonial literature” when the governing theoretical framework shifts from Third World nationalism to postmodernism’ (Ahmad 1995, 1).

non-specialised approach to third-world literature, as raw material ‘packaged for transnational consumption’ (Spivak 1989, 276).<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere, Spivak has argued that postcolonial studies may, in the worst scenario:

allow the indigenous elite from other countries to claim marginality without *any developed* doctoral-level sense of the problematic of decolonized space and without any method of proper verification within the discipline ... If this study is forever contained within English (or other metropolitan literatures), without expansion into fully developed transnational culture studies, colonial and postcolonial discourse studies can also construct a canon of “Third World Literature (in translation)” that may lead to a “new orientalism.” (Spivak 1993, 277)

One example of a literary modality being canonised as third-world literature is according to Spivak magical realism. Criticising the tendency to see magical realism as the ‘paradigmatic of Third World literary production’, not because magical realism necessarily is another name for a commodified literature, but rather because by focusing solely on ‘*this* style as the right Third World Style’, Spivak argues that critics are fetishising the mode of production of literary discourse with the consequence ‘that the declared rupture of “decolonization” boringly repeats the rhythms of colonization with the consolidation of recognizable styles’ (Spivak 1990a, 223). Seen as ‘the trademark of third world literary production’ (Spivak 1993, 277), the genre of magical realism thus fixates a stereotypical discourse of marginality which does not acknowledge the fact that not all postcolonial writers ‘show their awareness of being in a minority, being marginal’; Spivak even goes on to draw lines between those critics who only choose to write about ‘writers who write in the consciousness of marginality and christen them “Third World”’ (Spivak 1990a, 223), and the reproduction and reinforcement of a Eurocentric logic.

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<sup>10</sup> In the essay-collection *In Theory*, Aijaz Ahmad presents a series of arguments along similar lines as Spivak’s (i.e. that third-world cultural products are shipped to metropolitan research institutes in order to be turned into commodities), although whereas Spivak sees this problematic as a reason to sustain rigorous self-critique and to elaborate more refined specialist-knowledge, Ahmad rejects the postcolonial perspective outright. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak comments: ‘although both Aijaz Ahmad and I criticize metropolitan post-colonialism, I hope my position is less locationist, more nuanced with a productive acknowledgement of complicity’ (Spivak 1999, xii).

This initial positioning of the problematic constituted by the so-called third world literary provides us with an illuminative perspective of Spivak's attempt to construct a radical postcolonial pedagogy. Responding to the problematic of reading cross-cultural representational strategies along the contemporary global economic system, Spivak proposes a form of 'auto-critique', which follows the figure of the paralogy. 'Paralogy', according to Lyotard, 'must be distinguished from innovation: the latter is under the command of the system, or at least used by it to improve its efficiency; the former is a move ... played in the pragmatics of knowledge' (Lyotard 1991, 61). The figure of the paralogy, in this particular sense, supplements another figure frequently used in the Spivakian vocabulary – 'catachresis' – which designates something that does not signify or refer in a 'proper' way, and which to Spivak involves the emancipatory possibility of reclaiming or reformulating a constellation of meaning which, to begin with, has been distorted within a given hegemonic-conventional discourse. Spivak's paralogic and catachrestic auto-critique does not seek to produce positive knowledge as such, but rather to recode 'the over-determined play of cultural value' (Spivak 1990a, 231).<sup>11</sup> As a critique constituting itself as the catachrestic process of recoding, a site of struggle over conventional values and concepts, Spivak delineates what she sees as the potential of the postcolonial perspective – to 'renegotiate some of the deceptive "banality"' (234) characterising non-western cultural productions in the eyes of a western audience.

What I want to stress in particular through these quotations is an objection to the aspect which Spivak describes as a 'silencing' of nuances and real differences, occurring in

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<sup>11</sup> On the notion of 'Value-coding', see also Spivak's essays, 'Speculations on Reading Marx: After Reading Derrida' and 'Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value', in *In Other Worlds*; 154-175

effortless acts of cultural interactions and translations.<sup>12</sup> In the essay ‘A Literary Representation of the Subaltern’, Spivak claims that the argument that “‘Much third world fiction is still caught in realism” (whereas the international literatures of the First World have graduated into language games) is a predictable generalization. This is often the result of a lack of acquaintance with the language of the original’ (Spivak 1988b, 267). Although the mode of realism is equally devalued in Spivak’s deconstructive-postcolonial discourse, her objection indicates to some extent *why* it is necessary to pay greater attention to formal aspects, whether viewed as innovative, experimental or ‘merely’ realist. Spivak’s objection also implies another, perhaps even more uncanny, aspect, namely the inability within Spivak’s own theoretical discourse to *read* the textual modality of realism. As I will go on to argue, the notion of realism as a literary form may constitute one of the most interesting dimensions to investigate from a formal point of view, partly because it seems to occupy a problematic across the different theoretical formations within the field of postcolonial studies; a blind spot which is either ignored *as* realist form at the expense of being read as an unproblematic, mimetic-naïve representation of the extra-literary, or problematised as being formally complicit with hegemonic structures of power – or, as in Spivak’s case, rejected as being a ‘bad’ translation.<sup>13</sup>

Whereas Spivak’s deconstructive perspective does not allow her to go into a more elaborated conception of the importance of realism, one could argue that there is a link between her categorical *rejection* of a nuanced engagement with this particular literary

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<sup>12</sup> See Spivak (2000); p.17

<sup>13</sup> If we are to accept Spivak’s argument that many third-world texts *appear* as realist texts because metropolitan readers are unfamiliar with the texts’ original language, would this imply that if readers *were* familiar with the texts in question, these texts would appear as something closer to what one may describe, in Spivak’s words, as postmodernist language games? One could also argue that because of its uncanny formal familiarity to a western audience, realism may constitute a ‘negative’ way of measuring the strategically limited postmodern (or post-postmodern) condition in which many of the key concepts in postcolonial studies have been developed.

mode of representation, and what she sees as radical literary strategies. In Spivak's view, the figures of the literary, as an 'event' characterised by way of 'working differently' from other allegorical formations, may explore the catachrestical limits of subject-positions and formations of marginality, while renegotiating the master-tropes of hegemonic discourse.

Having thus framed the potential of the literary, Spivak goes on to argue that the postcolonial literary text

works in bits and pieces, with something like a relationship with the postmodern habit of citing without authority. With a pedagogy that sees this as the mark of the fragmented postcolonial mode, the allegory can offer a persistent parabasis to the development of any continuous ethno-cultural narrative *or* of a continuous re-inscription. (Spivak 1990a, 231)

Using irony, or permanent parabasis, in the Demanian sense,<sup>14</sup> to designate the 'sustained interruption from a source relating "otherwise" (*allegorein* = speaking otherwise) to the continuous unfolding of the main system of meaning' (Spivak 1999, 430), Spivak sees the act of *reading* the figures of the literary as a site of renegotiating the value-coded spaces of culture. The literary, "'literature as such'" (176), as 'a figure that provides an experience of the impossible' (428), or as a 'singular and unverifiable margin' (175) which can be traced along the contours of the allegorical master-tropes of the global discourse, becomes a kind of 'mirror text' through which Spivak's deconstructive-postcolonial perspective identifies and frames its margins, and, as such, legitimises itself as a critical voice of the (im)-possible margin.<sup>15</sup> As an ambiguous, (im)-possible margin, constantly generating new

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<sup>14</sup> Parabasis designates to go aside/distance-as-interruption. In *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, De Man re-interprets Friedrich Schlegel's writings on the concept of parabasis as the 'sudden revelation of the discontinuity between two rhetorical codes', disrupting and disseminating the figural chain of the text, which eventually turns into 'the permanent parabasis of an allegory (of figure), that is to say, irony. Irony is no longer a trope but the undoing of the deconstructive allegory of all tropological cognitions, the systematic undoing, in other words, of understanding. As such, far from closing off the tropological system, irony enforces the repetition of its aberration' (De Man 1979, 300-301).

<sup>15</sup> Sometimes Spivak writes, after Bataille, the prefix in parenthesis – '(im)-possible' – to indicate the ambiguity of the logic of rhetoricity operating within the figures of the literary, 'the rhetorical question that transforms the condition of the (im)-possibility of answering – of telling the story – into the condition of its

(postcolonialised) readings within the existing grammar of the text, the dimension of the literary provides the stage for the postcolonial imperative of reading-otherwise; responding to the (im)-possible margin of the literary, Spivak's version of the postcolonial perspective proposes an excessive and transgressive *misreading*, one that in a sense attempts to *mimic* (and hence borrow) the catachrestic force of the literary.

### Literature at the Threshold

At the same time, Spivak's deconstructive-postcolonial perspective is also one that to a certain extent defers an actual reading of the literary, 'literature as such', while instead using the figures of the literary to provide a stage on which she unfolds her own paralogic and catachrestic auto-critique.

Trapped within an increasingly homogenised and authoritative discourse of the margin, while seemingly no longer capable of 'renegotiating the deceptive banality' of the postcolonial literary text within the logic of contemporary globalisation, the postcolonial perspective simultaneously seems to have lost its identity as the catachrestic recoding of systems of representation; a theoretical field where the distinctive boundaries and objectives have become blurred, and where allegedly *radical* gestures to an uncomfortable degree seem to follow a logic of institutionalised predictability.<sup>16</sup>

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possibility. Every production of experience, thought, knowledge, all humanistic disciplinary production, perhaps especially the representation of the subaltern in history or literature, has this double bind at its origin' (Spivak 1988b, 263). The (im)-possible in this sense thus corresponds in similar ways to her use of Freud's concept of the uncanny in *Death of a Discipline*.

<sup>16</sup> See Silvia Tandeciarz's essay 'Reading Gayatri Spivak's "French Feminism in an International Frame": A Problem for Theory' for a critique of Spivak's catachrestic methodology and meta-theoretical discourse. See also Barbara Christian's essay 'The Race for Theory' and Nancy Hartsock's 'Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theories', both criticising what they see as the excesses of theoretical developments in academia, a tendency to which Spivak's postcolonial discourse arguably has contributed.

Although remaining within the general framework of her catachrestic critique, Spivak's return to the discipline of Comparative Literature can possibly be seen as an attempt to balance her previous emphasis on strategies enhancing techniques of disrupting and misreading, with a counter-emphasis on reading closely the value of the *literal*, the 'object' itself:

Anyone who believes that a literary education should still be sponsored by universities must allow that one must learn to read. And to learn to read is to learn to dis-figure the undecidable figure into a responsible literacy, again and again. (Spivak 2003, 71-72)<sup>17</sup>

Spivak's melancholic return to the literally literary can be seen as an attempt to restore the field's distinctive identity via a process of *distinguishing* the figures of the literary, thus avoiding yet another production of a commodified notion of marginality where literary cannot 'speak' or 'perform' the genuinely radical postcolonial imperative.

In *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak discusses the potentials of a combination of Area Studies and Comparative Literature, arguing that whereas the former possesses an expert knowledge of foreign cultures, it is still embedded in anachronistic discourses that were constructed during the Cold War, while Comparative Literature lacks an actual 'interdisciplinarity', that is, 'remains imprisoned within the borders it will not cross' (7). But Comparative Literature is also characterised by a sophisticated treatment of form and language that may retain the specificity of the original text, something which is not the case

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<sup>17</sup> Spivak's theoretical discourse has often been accused of an exaggerated emphasis on the dimension of textuality, which allegedly cuts off further investigation of materially determining factors. Even if Spivak often refers to Marxist theory (and in particular Marx's writings), I would agree with Neil Lazarus' comment that 'she seems to me "more of a Marxist" in the wider field of critical theory than she is [in] the narrower field of postcolonial studies: her pointedly Marxist writings, that is to say, tend to situate themselves, for the most part, as interventions into the "theory" field; within the field of postcolonial studies, by contrast, it is as a feminist exponent of deconstruction that she is most often taken up' (Lazarus 1999b, 25). For an argument that Spivak's reliance on a poststructuralist vocabulary balances toward an unintentional disempowering of socially anchored resistance, see in particular Benita Parry's article 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse'; 13-36



with cultural- and postcolonial studies, 'tied to plot summary masquerading as analysis of representation, and character analysis by a precritical model of motivation or an unearned psychoanalytic vocabulary' (19). In order for cultural studies and postcolonial studies to retain their positions as privileged tools of carving out 'singularity' and 'otherness' in between the volatile cultural processes of the global market forces, Spivak argues that their methodologies must incorporate some of the 'old' skills of studying literature, which thus implies a return to Comparative Literature and Area Studies.

To cross borders, Spivak argues, one must avoid having a set of pre-shaped, instrumental, and generalising notions, whereby all literatures coming from the 'Third World' are read as sociological evidences for 'class' or 'nationalism'. Launching what she calls a 'new comparative literature' (xii), which practices both a thorough care for language and demonstrates expert knowledge of radically different cultural paradigms, Spivak outlines a literary approach that will potentially be able to account for all the 'countless indigenous languages in the world that were programmed to vanish when the maps were made' (15), as well as account for the cultural specificity of socio-anthropological themes like nationalism, identity, modernity, and class, while observing that they may be 'in play in many different ways' (66).

At the heart of Spivak's argument lies an idea of literature 'as training the imagination – the great inbuilt instrument of othering' (13). She uses the notion 'teleopoiesis', borrowed from Derrida,<sup>18</sup> to combine an idea of 'imaginative making' with the prefix 'tele' ('distant'), in order to support her call for a greater attention toward the specificity of literature; rather than appropriating the other in our own conceptual

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<sup>18</sup> From Derrida's *Politics of Friendship*. See also Corinne Scheiner's article 'Teleiopoiesis, Telepoesis, and the Practice of Comparative Literature' for a discussion of the different ways the concept has been coined etymologically and conceptually.

framework, which, as Derrida points out, never really allows us to ‘transcend idiomatic differences’ (10), the literary imagination enables us to cross borders into the depths of the unknown, reminding us that ‘we are ourselves *Fremdsprächig*, “foreign speakers”’ (22), as Sigmund Freud argued in *The Uncanny* (published in 1919). The literary imagination opens the possibility to put ourselves at risk in the process of imaginative ‘othering’, by turning the familiar into the unfamiliar, the homely into the unhomely; to transgress the binary cultural models and sense the strangeness, the constructedness, of our own cultural categorisations.<sup>19</sup>

Many, undoubtedly well-meaning, anthologies of translated foreign literatures produced within the field of cultural- and postcolonial studies are examples of what Spivak calls ‘failure of teleopoiesis’ (50), where the cultural other has become totally domesticated and commodified within a western cultural imagination, because of a lack of attention to language and form. To avoid the complacent commodification of radically different cultures, ‘teleopoiesis’ must be used to produce ‘transgressive readings’ (55) that preserve the undecidable and unknown figures in our systems of categorisation, via linguistic attention which allows the heterogeneity of foreign texts to come into play; to read ‘the

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<sup>19</sup> One may of course question the actual possibility, and its consequences, of encountering the other through a process of teleopoiesis (to imagine oneself as a ‘foreign’ subject), as Spivak sees it, a problematic that I will discuss further in chapter five. In chapter five I will moreover discuss Walter Benjamin’s theory of translation, which shares a number of similarities with Spivak’s argument in *Death of a Discipline* (as well as other essays by Spivak). Both Spivak and Benjamin’s approaches to the question of form and the specificity of literature, its ‘poetic’ qualities that distinguish it from other modes of expression, argue for the importance of maintaining, indeed ‘translating’ or ‘transferring’ (*überleiten, überliefern*) something foreign, alien, or unhomely, into one’s own cultural taxonomy of experience. And both stress the importance of approaching the literary work’s *formal* dimension, in order to preserve something about to vanish. Although Benjamin and Spivak formulate different views on what constitutes the potential of the literary figures, they share a utopian vision of the possibility to overcome the radical differences between cultures, attentive of the dangers of commodifying and domesticating otherness, through the attempt to let the figure of the other *survive*, *überleben* through the act of *überliefern*, whether in reading, criticism or translation. It is an act that, according to Spivak and Benjamin, cannot be done in an instrumental, pre-critical way, but one that involves sensitive attention to the specificity of the formal finesses of the literary work, and thus, by implication, sensitive attention to the specificity of otherness.

logic of the rhetoric, not the text as cultural information' (61); to avoid using literature as a means to make a 'too-quick conclusion about gender, freedom of speech, and modernity' (ibid.).<sup>20</sup>

Spivak's *New Comparative Literature* teaches an ethic of reading that may possibly allow one to cross the borders dividing the world's continents, while preserving their cultural heterogeneity and specificity, within a collective, utopian vision of what she calls the 'planetary', an imaginary concept embracing the defamiliarising energy of 'the uncanny' (74) from a global point of view, and which Spivak uses to contrast the process of globalisation, meaning to her 'the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere' (72). The planetary vision attempts to dissolve the abstract 'gridwork of electronic capital' (ibid.), the artificially drawn lines dividing cultures and countries, lines drawn not only via politicised and historicised categorisations but also by a series of pseudo-transcendental figurations that we provide for ourselves, that is, metaphorise and categorise through our own specific cultural idiom; a dissolution which according to Spivak opens up the possibility of reconfiguring our cultural taxonomy of experience.

Tracing the question of the margin through Spivak's numerous writings, from the marginalised positioning of the subaltern voice as proposed in 'Can the Subaltern Speak' to the investigation of the marginal positioning of the postcolonial literary in *Death of a Discipline*, suggests two registers for situating otherness which, although they must be seen as intimately related, cannot be collapsed into one single formation. The literary – as

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<sup>20</sup> In the essay 'How to read a "culturally different" book' from 1994, Spivak proposes some of the arguments that she reemploys in *Death of a Discipline*, for example the warning against using literary texts to reach 'too quick conclusions'. Discussing R.K. Narayan's novel *The Guide*, she writes: 'A too quick answer, taking the novels as direct expressions of cultural consciousness, with no sense of the neo-colonial traffic in cultural identity and the slow and agonising triumph of the migrant voice, would simply see them as repositories of post-colonial selves, post-colonialism, even post-colonial resistance' (Spivak 1994, 127).

teleopoiesis, or, as a relational process of measuring, and thus *preserving*, cultural-conceptual differences by way of an imaginative work – constitutes the utopian possibility of overcoming the danger of eradicating nuances and specificities of otherness in the global market. Consequently, the *loss* of the teleopoietic dimension of the literary signals the commodification of the margin – and, hence the loss of the possibility of hearing the voice of the other within our own conceptual framework.

As I have argued, the symptoms of this process of commodification surface through a contaminating atmosphere of melancholia, ‘a condition of identity disorder where subject and object become indistinguishable from one another’ (Cheng 1997, 51), in which postcolonial criticism attempts to restore its ‘absent’ object, the distinctiveness of literary otherness, through an increasingly self-reinforcing and tautological practice, as a way of restoring the distinctiveness of its own identity. The loss of the specificity of the literary thus implies the loss of the relation by which postcolonial studies, *reflexively*, can approach the complex representational register of otherness, and thereby map the coordinates necessary to navigate its distinctive, political imperatives within the logics of global capitalism.

Thus, the trajectory of Spivak’s work, from melancholic essays such as ‘Can the Subaltern Speak’ to the equally melancholic essay *Death of a Discipline* tells us something important about the trajectory of postcolonial studies as a whole. *Death of a Discipline* sets out a new direction in postcolonial studies, recognising that the loss of a genuinely critical margin is intimately connected with the lack of attention to the literary dimension of the postcolonial text, and that to solve this problematic implies a return to some of the old skills of studying literature. As I argued earlier, it is not a development which demonstrates a

major change of heart, but rather an awareness of the increasing dangers of institutionalisation, and a concrete attempt to propose a solution to confront this danger.

And yet one may also question to what extent this 'return to the literary' which Spivak outlines in *Death of a Discipline* actually overcomes the deeper issues at stake involved in what I have called postcolonial melancholia. I have argued that whereas the discipline of postcolonial studies generally has ignored the dimension of the literary, an issue which *Death of a Discipline* pertinently addresses, it does not follow that a normative aesthetic ethos in particular has been absent, as much as it has operated tacitly. Since Spivak's call for a return to the literary is still quite evidently tied up with the critical vocabulary developed in response to the political and theoretical imperatives of her earlier thought, I think the suspicion emerges as to whether her vision of a new comparative literature may not in fact be said to constitute yet another version of what I have referred to as the modernist ethos; a discursive and normative regime correlating particular aesthetic techniques with particular political imperatives, which has led to what Moretti designates as the loss of distance between a given theoretical discourse and its exemplary literary texts – a loss that implies increased dogmatism, and hence a decrease of radicalism. As such, calling for a return to the aesthetic dimension, in the way that Spivak does, thus perhaps merely ends up making *explicit* an aesthetic ethos that was previously *tacitly* operating in many postcolonial literary analyses. But the question remains as to whether her poetics may actually lead to a resolution of some of the deeper issues at stake in postcolonial melancholia, or whether her poetics rather constitutes a form of rationalisation of a normative aesthetic regime that dominates an increasingly homogenised discipline – homogenised, not despite of, but perhaps precisely because of that regime.

## Literary Otherness

In part due to its limited length and form (a series of revised lectures), *Death of a Discipline* leaves a number of questions open, as we have seen. To pursue these questions further, I want to turn to Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature*, in which he offers a more elaborate poetics of literary otherness – similar to, but more coherently argued than, Spivak's new comparative literature. Like Spivak, Attridge's starting point is a critique of an instrumental, pre-critical approach to literary works. Instrumental approaches to literature, that is, seeing literature as a means to reach certain socio-political conclusions, have undoubtedly been valuable in terms of measuring literary texts' inscription in ideological and historical frameworks; but such approaches have equally failed to provide an account of the specific processes that constitute the actual implications, potentials, and ultimately *importance* of the literary work.

But how do we, more concretely, manage on the one hand to argue for the importance of the specificity of literature and a return to a discussion of literary form, while on the other hand avoiding subscribing to another version of a transcendental, autonomous and universal idea of literature's distinction? One of the distinctive qualities of literature, Attridge argues, is that any attempt to define the borderline dividing the 'literary' and the 'non-literary' is bound to fail, and 'this is a *necessary* failure, one by which literature as a cultural practice has been continuously constituted' (Attridge 2004a, 1). Instead of arguing for any kind of essential quality within the literary work, that is, conceiving the literary work as a unity having stable borders framing an always-identical content, Attridge believes that the concept of literature must be understood as a process of border-crossing

and non-conformity.<sup>21</sup> This dynamic concept of literature correlates with Attridge's notion of 'culture', embodying

a complex matrix of habits, cognitive models, representations, beliefs, expectations, prejudices, and preferences that operate intellectually, emotionally, and physically to produce a sense of at least relative continuity, coherence, and significance out of the manifold events of human living. (21)

From this general epistemic matrix, a unique configuration of experience is formed at the individual level, what Attridge calls 'idioculture': 'Idioculture is the name for the totality of the cultural codes constituting a subject, at a given time, as an overdetermined, self-contradictory system' (22), which, however, never exhausts one's *singular* individuality. 'Singularity', in Attridge's sense, designates that aspect which can never wholly be generalised, theorised or explained according to any existing set of norms.<sup>22</sup> Rather, singularity is always designating something other than what constitutes one's idioculture; to respond to one's singularity is at the same time to respond to otherness, the idioculture's other, that is, the alterity of one's self. Attridge writes: 'I am always, in a way, other to myself. It is this instability and inconsistency, these internal and external pressures and blind spots, this self-dividedness, that constitute the conditions for the emergence of the other' (25). Otherness occupies that dimension which a culture, and hence idioculture, at a

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<sup>21</sup> Both Spivak and Attridge are inspired by a poststructuralist notion of the literary, and more particularly the Derridean version. The notion of the literary as a process of 'border-crossing' is similar to what Derrida has designated 'débordement' (see Derrida 2004, 69), an effect signalling the unavoidable instability at the heart of all frameworks, margins and divisions.

<sup>22</sup> The notion of the 'singular' has been used in a variety of ways in recent criticism (see for example Peter Hallward's *Absolutely Postcolonial – Writing Between the Singular and the Specific*). To Attridge, 'The singularity of a cultural object consists in its difference from all other such objects, not simply as a particular manifestation of general rules but as a peculiar nexus within the culture that is perceived as resisting or exceeding all pre-existing general determinations', which means that 'singularity can be experienced only as a process of adjustment in norms and habits whereby it is recognized, affirmed, and, at least partially and temporarily, accommodated' (Attridge 2004a, 63).

given time and place, cannot accept insofar as it wants to preserve its norms and values unchanged.<sup>23</sup>

However, one never responds to the other directly, but only to ‘the remolding of the self that brings the other into being as, necessarily, no longer entirely other’ (24). This is where literature and other creative inventions, according to Attridge, receive their importance. The literary work, and other modes of art, brings otherness into the sphere of experience through the tensions, contradictions and blind spots of a given cultural paradigm, by offering a ‘hitherto unperceived relationship, a different way of handling materials, a new method of production – the list is endless’ (25). The singularity of literature, no matter how close its theme is to the reader, is what resists existing norms of understanding and perception, ‘and that moment of registering alterity is a moment in which I simultaneously acknowledge my failure to comprehend and find my procedures of comprehension beginning to change’ (27). The specificity of literature is thus, according to Attridge, not something static, but rather an ‘*event* of mental and emotional restructuring’ (28), which is never wholly accommodated or domesticated within an existing culture; rather, the

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<sup>23</sup> By ‘Otherness’ Attridge does not imply ‘a mystical ideality nor an inviolable materiality, neither a Platonic Form nor a Kantian *Ding an sich*. The other can emerge only as a version of the familiar, strangely lit, refracted, self-distanced. It arises from the intimate recesses of the cultural web that constitutes subjectivity, which is to say it arises as much from within the subject as from outside it’ (Attridge 2004a, 76). This version differs, Attridge points out, from otherness as understood in the notion of ‘the violence of representation’ or ‘the domestication of the other’ (e.g. as formulated by Gayatri Spivak or Edward Said). Such a notion, Attridge argues, ‘presupposes a narrative in which the other starts by being wholly different and is then stripped of its otherness so that it can be integrated or manipulated. In the account I am giving, the other is not this at first utterly inaccessible and then all too accessible entity. *Only in relating to me* is the other other, and its otherness is registered in the adjustments I have to make in order to acknowledge it – adjustments that may never become wholly second nature to me.’ (30). As a ‘truth-value’, the other must within this perspective be distinguished from the ‘real’ subject, or, from reality itself; as such, Attridge’s poetics, I think, elaborates some of the potential of literary otherness which Spivak emphasises in *Death of a Discipline* – different from, although related to, otherness in the notion of ‘the domestication of the other’.



absorption of the uncanny, defamiliarising quality of literature<sup>24</sup> requires an act of fundamental, cultural change.

### The Politics of Form

Derek Attridge's attempt to rethink the relations between the significance of literary form and the ethics of otherness, emphasising formal inventiveness, newness, and originality, constitutes a sophisticated contemporary argument for a return to an idea of the specificity of literature. In Attridge's view, the formal dimension of a literary work, forming and performing meaning, allows us to interact with otherness and alterity: 'Otherness', Attridge argues, 'is at stake in every literary text, and in a particular conspicuous way in the text that disrupts the illusions of linguistic immediacy and instrumentality' (Attridge 1994, 249).

If one should point to a problem within this perspective, as well as within Spivak's approach in *Death of a Discipline* (and which of course on another level may also be seen as their theories' strength), it is the favouring of certain literary techniques and modalities – a problem which, as we have seen, Franco Moretti designates as the 'loss of distance' between a given interpretive theory (i.e. what I have referred to as the modernist ethos) and favoured literary texts.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to critical positions that I will discuss later, Attridge shows, however, great awareness of this problematic. In an essay on literary form and J.M.

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<sup>24</sup> Although Attridge's argument for the specificity of literature, one that involves a 'process of continuous innovation', may seem similar to, and is inspired by, the concept of *priëm ostraneniija*, that is, the defamiliarisation or de-automatisation of language through stylistic and formal devices, as envisioned by the Russian Formalists, there is an important distinction; the Formalists argue that 'what shines through by virtue of these devices is "reality"' (Attridge 2004a, 39) – an argument that Attridge cannot accept. To Attridge, 'The other is not the real, but rather a truth, a value, a feeling, a way of doing things, or some complex combination of these, that has been historically occluded and whose emergence or re-emergence is important for a particular time and place' (ibid.).

<sup>25</sup> One might for example see this aspect unfolded in Attridge's book *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, containing a series of brilliant, and specifically *literary*, readings of the South-African Nobel-prize winner's works, yet a book that also leaves open the question as to what possible literary potential works of fiction might contain or demonstrate, which are markedly different from the aesthetics of Coetzee's highly sophisticated modernist forms.

Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, Attridge comments on his emphasis on formal-linguistic

inventiveness and originality:

This may sound like a devaluation of the realist tradition, but it is a critique only of a certain way of reading that tradition – a reading, it is true, which realist authors often invited, but not one that is inevitable. To respond in full responsibility to the act of a realist work is to respond to its unique staging of meaning, and therefore to its otherness. It could even be said that the realist work is more, not less, demanding than the modernist work, in that its otherness is often disguised, and requires an even more scrupulous responsiveness. (Attridge 1994, 262n)<sup>26</sup>

To Attridge's credit, his theory does not implicitly operate with a simultaneous debunking of more conventional modalities, such as realism, in relation to which an allegedly more sophisticated aesthetic strategy is supposed to possess the upper hand. However, this latter aspect – the radicalisation of modernist techniques which is followed by an implicit critique of realism – is nonetheless a characteristic manoeuvre in postcolonial critical works which recently have stressed the dangers of institutionalisation within the field of postcolonial studies while simultaneously argued for a renewed attention to the figures of the literary.

To illuminate this problematic more specifically, I want to discuss in detail some aspects of Neil Lazarus' essay 'The Politics of Postcolonial Modernism',<sup>27</sup> in which he explores and criticises, but also perhaps to some extent unwittingly confirms, the implications of what Moretti refers to as the 'loss of distance' in contemporary criticism. Lazarus wants to rethink the dimension of postcolonial aesthetic resistance, as a way of avoiding what he sees as the imminent threat of the (postmodernist) commodification of postcolonial studies. To explain some of the interrelated formations of the postcolonial theoretical framework (e.g. the hierarchical mechanisms of selection, exclusion, and the production of the idea of a 'corresponding' postcolonial literature), Neil Lazarus refers to

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<sup>26</sup> See also Attridge (2004a); 120

<sup>27</sup> Originally published in *The European Legacy* 7:6, 2002; 771-782. I refer to the article republished in the collection *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, edited by Ania Loomba et. al. from 2005.

the canonising process of modernism as criticised by Raymond Williams in the book *The Politics of Modernism*.<sup>28</sup> As an aesthetic paradigm, Williams argued, modernism became so powerful and widespread as the ‘universal’ and ‘definitive’ mode of cultural expression, that all other modes which did not correspond to the paradigm of modernism were displaced as ‘premodern and disparaged as such, as relics, mere anachronisms, forms whose time had definitively come and gone’ (Lazarus 2005, 429).<sup>29</sup> Lazarus compares this distorting process of monopolisation to the field of contemporary postcolonial criticism, constructing ‘a certain limited optic on the world, a selective tradition [which] has been imagined as a universal’ (432).<sup>30</sup>

However, Lazarus concedes that he feels rather uneasy about Williams’ general dismissal of the modernist project’s ‘critical and even revolutionary dimensions’ (429), at least at *some stage*, and goes on referring to Fredric Jameson’s more refined argument (in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*) – that modernist aesthetics lost its critical dimension after having become institutionalised and canonised in the late 1950’s, which paved the way for the discourse of postmodernism. But Lazarus wants to insist on

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<sup>28</sup> For further discussions of Raymond Williams’ *The Politics of Modernism* by Lazarus, see ‘Hating Tradition Properly’; 18-20 & *Nationalism and Cultural Practice*; 153-154

<sup>29</sup> In a similar way to Williams, Fredric Jameson has argued (as I mentioned in chapter one) that ‘the canon, or Literature as such ... is simply modernism, as the late modernists have selected and rewritten in their own image’ (Jameson 2002b, 210). Commenting on this argument by Jameson, Nicholas Brown writes: ‘This is to say that the canonization of high modernism in the United States after World War II effectively decided the terms by which all literature was to be evaluated, so that “literary history” in effect becomes the prehistory of modernism ... the moment modernism comes to exist, it is discovered always to have existed’ (Brown 2005, 30).

<sup>30</sup> Lazarus writes: ‘Like Williams’s modernists, postcolonial critics have also been disposed to construe their own particular dispositions ... as cultural universals’ (Lazarus 2005, 432-433), which effectively have produced a distorted perspective on aesthetic resistance (because of the canonisation of a narrow list of themes, questions, strategies etc.). By focusing on explicitly modernist textual modalities, however, Lazarus fails to produce credible solutions as to how to avoid the marginalisation of works that do not conform to the institutionalised postcolonial perspective. That Lazarus does not take up a sustained reflection on the aesthetics of realist form, for example, seems to indicate a certain blind spot within his theoretical perspective; a blindness, I would argue, which precisely has been advanced by the process which he sets out to criticise, namely the institutionalisation of postcolonial studies.

the *ongoing* criticality of modernist literary practice. I am interested in work by contemporary writers (including “postcolonial” ones), which is (still), arguably, illuminated by recognizably modernist protocols and procedures ... we cannot proceed without a theory responsive simultaneously to the notional indispensability and the practical achievement of what, basing myself on Adorno’s investigation of the “Kafka-effect” ... I will call “disconsolation” in and through literature. (431)

This is a modernist mode of writing that comes after the malaise of institutionalisation, which, in Lazarus’ view, is still capable of critical resistance. As an example of this kind of literature, Lazarus mentions Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which shares a number of affinities with Kafka’s writings, insofar as in both writers’ works we find ‘the conceptual underpinnings of a particular *kind* of writing, a particular *mode* of literary practice’ (432).

Specifying this kind of literary practice, Lazarus writes:

*Disconsolation* is the project of this writing, its deepest aesthetic (hence indirectly social) aspiration. I do not believe that this project has been exhausted over the course of the past fifty years, either as a result of the recuperation of modernism in academic discourse or as a result of more far-reaching changes in the social order. (ibid.)

Although admitting that the Kafka-effect no longer exists, Lazarus goes on to say: ‘We can readily concede that in today’s world, what would have seemed ugly now seems realistic. But to say this is not to say that what is thus represented is no longer disturbing or disquieting or unnerving’ (430). What I want to stress here are the words ‘thus represented’; following Lazarus, no one is shocked by Kafka today because he has become institutionalised – ‘thus represented’ – and this is seemingly why we need a theory to de-reify (the de-reifying potential of) Kafka’s novels, and Kafkaesque novels like the ones by Coetzee, so that they may once again be able to induce in the reader the Kafka-effect (which to begin with, one may assume, needed no ‘theory’ to de-reify its potential), or the effect of disconsolation (meaning the opposite of Lazarus’ definition of the ‘realistic’), that is, the effect of de-reifying the reader (from, say, Bhabha’s version of postcolonial discourse).

‘Disconsolation’, as Lazarus sees it, is only to be found ‘in and through literature’ which ‘resists the accommodationism of what has been canonized as modernism and that does what at least some modernist work has done from the outset; namely, says “no”; refuses integration, resolution, consolation, comfort; protests and criticizes’ (431).<sup>31</sup> Thus represented, one may argue that even when *this* kind of resistant literature indeed has not quite resisted institutionalisation, it seems to leave the literary in a curious state of helplessness; as something that is unable to speak for itself, unable to unleash its critical potential on its own, had it not been for Lazarus’ theory of disconsolation, which on the other hand only emerges as that which is responsive to a project of writing apparently already inherent in the (modernist) modes of literature, as that which has not been ‘exhausted over the course of the past fifty years’ (432).

### **The Monopolisation of the Literary**

Lazarus’ attempt to rethink the critical dimension of the postcolonial aesthetic, not only in this particular essay but throughout his works,<sup>32</sup> crystallises, perhaps to an even greater

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<sup>31</sup> In an early essay, Lazarus writes: ‘[the modernist text] refuses to be encoded seamlessly into history, where history is understood, as Walter Benjamin understood it in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” as the relentlessly totalitarian and reductive discourse of the oppressor. The modernist text holds out against such reduction on the strength of its modernism, its mode of being as a text’ (Lazarus 1986-1987, 135). In this essay, Lazarus furthermore criticises Adorno’s dismissal of the committed work of art, arguing that ‘we cannot, in thinking about modernism in South Africa, distinguish as categorically as did Adorno between the social meaning of art and its own self-understanding’ (141). In another essay, Lazarus elaborates on this critique, proposing that we must instead ‘read modernism against the grain’ (Lazarus 1999b, 18), and ‘look at modernism somewhat eccentrically, from its margins’ (19); in other words, we must restore the radicalism of modernism from a *postcolonial* perspective (and thus save it both from Adorno’s Eurocentrism and postmodernism’s institutionalisation of modernism).

<sup>32</sup> See for example the essays ‘Modernism and Modernity: T.W. Adorno and Contemporary White South African Literature’, ‘Hating Tradition Properly’, as well as the books *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* and *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*. Similar to Lazarus’s position, Deepika Bahri’s *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics and Postcolonial Literature* provides another important attempt to rethink the field of postcolonial literary studies inspired by Adorno and the Frankfurt-school, yet ultimately I would raise similar concerns with regard to her argument for a return to the aesthetic, as I do in connection with Lazarus’ position.

extent than Spivak and Attridge, the complicated process of resolving what Huggan has called the 'field's unresolved attempt to reconcile political activism and cultural critique' (Huggan 2001, 261).<sup>33</sup> Although Lazarus offers a scathing attack on certain aspects of the contemporary field of postcolonial studies, his aim is to *maintain* a critical perspective (in contrast to, say, Ahmad, whose outright rejection of postcolonialism may, at times, resemble Lazarus'),<sup>34</sup> a perspective which *resists*.

The emphasis on 'oppositionality' (against totalitarianism and other forms of oppressive discourses) is why Lazarus identifies *modernism* (in the Adornian sense) as *the* radical postcolonial aesthetic modality per se. And yet, if 'there is only the shortest of distances between "In the Penal Colony" and Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*' (Lazarus 2005, 431),<sup>35</sup> Lazarus's comparison seems to raise the question as to why we

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<sup>33</sup> Lazarus' perspective is to a greater extent concerned with the concrete radicality of postcolonial studies as a politically committed field, and the ways in which literary texts may support such a commitment, whereas Attridge's approach – in *The Singularity of Literature* – is formulated more generally in relation to Literature as such; Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* is in part a response to the Bernheimer-report, thus equally formulated more broadly in relation to the field of literary studies (rather than to postcolonial studies, in particular, as a politically committed field).

<sup>34</sup> Although Lazarus shows sympathy for arguments like the ones advanced by Ahmad, he ultimately finds them 'deeply misconceived. Among many other things, they make impossible any balanced consideration of the intellectual (and ideological) *achievements* of postcolonial studies as a scholarly field' (Lazarus 1999b, 26-27). However, it is according to Lazarus, 'necessary both to concede to the field the authentic insights and advances that have been generated within it, and to commit oneself never to fall behind these ... To concede these insights to the general field of postcolonial studies is not, of course, to resign oneself to its reigning assumptions and modes of procedure' (27-28). For critiques of Ahmad's attack on postcolonial studies, see Benita Parry's 'A Critique Mishandled' and Neil Lazarus' 'Postcolonialism and the Dilemma of Nationalism: Aijaz Ahmad's Critique of Third-Worldism'.

<sup>35</sup> In the essay 'Modernism and Modernity', Lazarus observes that 'To read Coetzee is to understand why, in the years after World War II, Lukács was to reverse himself and to begin celebrating Kafka as a *realist*' (Lazarus 1986-1987, 150). Besides Lukács's reflections on Kafka in the massive work *Ästhetik* from 1963, Lazarus may think of a 1964-preface to *The Historical Novel* (see excerpt translated in Lichtheim 1970, 103), in which Lukács is surprisingly generous toward Kafka's texts; or he may have in mind a passage in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (originally published in German as *Wider den missverständenen Realismus* in 1958) when Lukács, equally surprisingly, suggests that 'Kafka belongs with the great realist writers' (Lukács 1979, 77). Although Lukács generally has become notorious for his dismissal of Kafka, he has always shown a considerable amount of admiration for Kafka's technique and craft (even before the war). And yet, the essay from which the quote stems ('Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann') also spells out quite crudely why Lukács prefers Thomas Mann's critical realism over Kafka's in the end 'decadent modernism' (92), precisely because the latter according to Lukács did not provide an adequately *resistant* response to the forces of fascism.

should develop a theory responsive to the un-consoling effects of the Kafkaesque, a theory capable of registering the Kafka-effect in literatures apparently *not* resisting the accommodationism to which they are exposed in the institutionalised version of postcolonial studies, uncomfortably similar to the monopolising process of the modernist paradigm. It could be argued that Lazarus' poetics involves a theoretical short-circuit, namely the fetishisation of *resistance* as the ultimate common denominator between his version of postcolonialism and modernist literary techniques – a modernist ethos which is much more explicit and pronounced than in for example Spivak's postcolonial perspective. The strength of Lazarus' perspective is a more concrete, and concretely politicised, poetics, whereas the disadvantage is a possible limitation of the potential of the literary, 'literature as such'.

What I am interested in here, in particular, is the underlying *justifications* that support Lazarus' poetics of disconsolation, which I see as connected with an overall desire for *legitimation*. The modernist ethos permeating Lazarus' analysis of the danger of institutionalisation in postcolonial studies – an analysis that is simultaneously followed by an attempt to reformulate a way of reading modernist aesthetics in a radical way – constitutes, initially, what could be seen as a melancholic attempt to *recuperate* a radical notion of the literary from its institutionalised and commodified context. However, this restorative attempt, precisely *because* of its explicit fetishisation of the modernist ethos, may at the same time also be seen as yet another way of *taming* the potential of the literary, so as to support Lazarus' radical perspective; a perspective *in need* of a *particular* version of the literary that demonstrates the *difference* between institutionalised

(postmodernist/poststructuralist) postcolonialism, and Lazarus' Marxist-modernist postcolonialism.

The institutionalised version of postcolonialism relies, according to Lazarus, on a series of dogmatic assumptions, such as

a constitutive anti-Marxism; an undifferentiating disavowal of all forms of nationalism and a corresponding exaltation of migrancy, liminality, hybridity, and multiculturalism; a hostility toward "holistic forms of social explanation" (toward totality and systematic analysis); an aversion to dialectics; and a refusal of an antagonistic or struggle-based model of politics. (423)

Naming the most emblematic representative of this version of postcolonialism – Homi Bhabha<sup>36</sup> – Lazarus argues that 'most writers simply do not write from the perspective that Bhabha spells out for us' (433), and lists various authors whose works differ in a number of ways from Bhabha's perspective.<sup>37</sup> This may be true, but at the same time one could also pose the question how many writers write from the perspective that Lazarus spells out for us. The problem is that although Lazarus insightfully points out some of the blind spots in much postcolonial literary criticism, his own alternative remains strategically limited within an aesthetic framework that fails to reach beyond those blind spots.<sup>38</sup> Lazarus justifies his postcolonial perspective, as *different* from Homi Bhabha's 'exaltation of migrancy, liminality, hybridity, and multiculturalism', on the basis of a value-paradigm of modernist-

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<sup>36</sup> Lazarus refers to Homi Bhabha's essay 'The Postcolonial and the Postmodern'.

<sup>37</sup> See also the essay 'Hating Tradition Properly' for the argument that 'For most practicing scholars in the field ... the 'post-' of postcolonialism is indeed the same as the 'post-' of postmodernism' (Lazarus 1999b, 27). Interestingly, in the essay 'Doubting the New World Order', similarly presenting a critique of the 'postmodern condition' from a postcolonial position, Lazarus is 'reminded of the world of modernist literature as it was analyzed critically by Georg Lukács' (Lazarus 1991, 98), a critique which he finds equally valid in connection with the 'postmodern condition'. Following a more explicit Adornian aesthetic perspective in other works, Lazarus's reminiscence of Lukács's scathing dismissal of modernist works in connection with critical comments on poststructuralist-oriented versions of postcolonialism disappears, so as not to undermine, one may assume, his attempt to implement a modernist-inflected Marxist perspective in postcolonial studies.

<sup>38</sup> The simple fact that Lazarus on the one hand claims that most writers simply do not write from the perspective that Bhabha spells out, naming a writer like Ngugi, while on the other hand failing to see that many writers, including Ngugi, do not write from Lazarus' Adornian perspective either, is an indication of this blindness.



radical aesthetic norms that are seen as *corresponding* to a radical politics. However, this justification, I would argue, is not radically different from Bhabha's exaltation of *his* political agenda via a set of anti-realist aesthetic norms that are seen as corresponding to a radical politics. To clarify, this is not to say that Bhabha's and Lazarus's *political* agendas are identical – in fact they could hardly be more different – but rather to say that their political agendas are both built upon the basis of what I have called the modernist ethos – that is, the fetishisation of a certain literary practice that is seen as corresponding to, and thus legitimising, their respective political agendas and value-paradigms.

Whereas Lazarus explicitly wants to draw attention to the radicality of a modernist aesthetic, the modernist ethos operates less explicitly in Bhabha's discourse, and more ambiguously, primarily because Bhabha's concerns are, from an overall perspective, not so much related to literary texts' aesthetic-singular qualities, but to their textual politics. One reason, I think, that Lazarus focuses on the *aesthetic* dimension, as a site of resistance, is in part because his overall aim is to criticise the dominating poststructuralist-inflected position in postcolonial studies (of which Bhabha is perhaps the main representative), which precisely has *neglected* an explicit attention toward the aesthetic (as in contrast to a reading of the text's aporias, mimicry or colonial complicity).

One could argue that in Lazarus' perspective the aesthetic is defined in terms of a radical modernist value which also tacitly (even if never explicitly) devalues other modalities, such as realism (as being radical in an aesthetic sense);<sup>39</sup> in Bhabha's

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<sup>39</sup> It should, however, be mentioned that Lazarus has defended realism (in an epistemological sense) against poststructuralist and postmodernist attacks; in the essay 'Doubting the New World Order' Lazarus writes that 'postmodernism prematurely extirpates *realism* in the course of its campaign against *empiricism*' (Lazarus 1991, 115). Part of Lazarus' argument, referring to Roy Bhaskar among others, is that postmodernist discourse confuses 'reality with knowledge of it' (118), degrading realism to a simple form of empiricism. In Lazarus view, postmodernism refuses to accept that an independent reality may exist outside its descriptive and theoretical discourse (even if this 'outside' may ultimately only be grasped through theory), which

perspective the aesthetic is much less foregrounded (for the obvious reason that one of Bhabha's main targets is aestheticism) as a radical value – albeit still operative as recognisably anti-realist – while on the other hand there is a more explicit devaluation of realism.<sup>40</sup> What Lazarus's explicit aesthetic focus does not recognise, even if it attempts to dissociate itself from that of Bhabha's perspective, is that by failing to think radically beyond the tacit aesthetic paradigm which operates in the latter's discourse, he merely reinforces this monopolising value-codification, albeit in an *explicit* way – a monopolisation which in part has led to the institutionalisation of postcolonial literary criticism (which, to begin with, was Lazarus's main object of criticism).

Here we may take a closer look at what I have referred to as the explicit devaluation of realism in Bhabha's perspective, in order to clarify more precisely the extent of the problem in Lazarus's poetics of disconsolation. In the early poststructuralist-oriented essay 'Representation and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration of Some Forms of Mimeticism', written in the mid-1980s, Bhabha takes up an extended reflection on literary criticism – 'the discourse by which texts are systematized, synthesized and signified, within a range of cultural institutions' (Bhabha 1984, 99). One of Bhabha's main objectives is to discredit the mode of realism on the basis of its alleged complicity with a perspective

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introduces a kind of epistemological relativism that ultimately renders it reformist and anti-revolutionary (despite its constant claims of being radical). Lazarus' defence of realism, as an alternative to postmodernism, is however one that is first and foremost formulated at an *epistemological* level, whereas I am arguing that Lazarus's preference for a poetics of disconsolation may tacitly devalue the potential of realism as an *aesthetic* form. Lazarus' strong emphasis on aesthetic *resistance* is possibly one of the main reasons why he seems unwilling to engage with realism at an aesthetic level; as Laura Moss has observed, 'If a text does not fit the profile of postcolonial resistance, as realist texts seldom do, it is generally considered incapable of subversion' (Moss 1998, 2).

<sup>40</sup> In fact, Bhabha's notion of postcolonial literature as 'transformative' is precisely built upon the idea that the radical postcolonial text 'transforms' the colonial-realist text (which also explains why Bhabha is unable to read postcolonial realist texts except as irredeemably compromised and complicit with colonial discourse). See Bhabha (1984); 111

constructing a Eurocentric history paradigm.<sup>41</sup> Bhabha argues that realist representation produces an essentialising illusion of a given, original ‘reality’; seen as such, ‘reality’ is endowed with a *prescriptive* authority, as a source determining the formal means by which a realist literary text can reflect ‘adequately’ and according to which it must be evaluated. This constellation of text-reality situates the text within a hierarchy, Bhabha argues (following Derrida), which privileges the term ‘reality’ over the ‘text’. The textual reproduction, expression or reflection of an image is then measured according to the privileged notion of an original reality, ‘in order to establish its degree of *representativeness*, the correctness of the image’ (100) – the knowledge paradigm embodying the always-already ideologically coded notion of ‘common sense’.

Within a postcolonial context, Bhabha goes on, the problem is that much criticism operates with issues of representing ‘the colonial subject at this mimetic level’ (95), and which is ‘largely content-oriented’ (100).<sup>42</sup> Beginning a different, alternative, non-western literary history – ‘the familiar quest for an origin that will authorize a beginning’ (96) – many postcolonial critics, according to Bhabha, value literary representations of local identities, authenticity and so forth in terms of a wholly simplified idea of the relation between text and reality. The reliance on a historicist-realist view also means that postcolonial (or nationalist) critics, otherwise sensitive to the question of racist discourse

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<sup>41</sup> According to Bhabha, ‘There is an undeniable collaboration between historicism and realism’ (Bhabha 1984, 94). ‘Historicism’ here refers to Hegelian ‘expressive causality’ in the Althusserian sense.

<sup>42</sup> Bhabha’s essay was published in 1984. His main target, mimetic-historicist modes of criticism (including both Leavisian Universalist and Nationalist approaches which according to Bhabha share aesthetic ground), can no longer be said to dominate contemporary critical discourse, precisely because it has, to some extent, been ‘replaced’ by the position which Bhabha proposes in this essay. Moreover, as I tried to demonstrate in chapter one; whereas Bhabha accuses ‘mimetic-historicist modes of criticism’ for being ‘largely content-oriented’ (Bhabha 1984, 100), which is arguably true, his own poststructuralist-inflected postcolonial approach, using a different vocabulary, is no less ‘content-oriented’ than the positions he criticises. Bhabha wants to change the focus from questions about ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ images of the other ‘to an understanding of the *processes of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse’ (Bhabha 2004, 95) – an understanding which, however, as Brenkman notes, primarily identifies ‘social contents and political context’ (Brenkman 2003, 120).

and Eurocentric structures, may argue against one type of stereotype only to replace it with another. The idea that a stereotype, for example the 'image of black people', is 'distorted' in relation to a pre-constituted model, results in a prescriptive criticism 'because it privileges an ideal "dream-image" in relation to which the text is judged' (105).<sup>43</sup>

As an alternative to both a historicist-realist criticism as well as an Althusserian ideological analysis, Bhabha proposes a deconstructive perspective, which is sensitive to representational problematics surrounding the colonial subject, and which understands the dimension of reality not as given, but mediated and 'produced; its meanings transformative, historical and relational rather than revelatory; its continuity and coherence underscored by division and difference' (96). From this position, Bhabha wants to demonstrate that the illusory stability of the signified paradoxically relies on 'the possibility of its arbitrariness, that is, the irony of its repression of discontinuity and difference in the construction of "sense"' (97). The values underlying the realist and historicist perspective, assuming unmediated access to reality, truth and originality, Bhabha quips, are 'necessary fictions that tragically believed too much in their necessity and too little in their own fictionality'

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<sup>43</sup> Bhabha discusses Althusser's ideological analysis (as opposed to Hegelian Marxism where ideology is seen as false consciousness whose real structures of foundation can be revealed), a method that according to Bhabha 'refuses the epistemological dependence on a pre-given Transcendental subject, which functions as both origin and end, guaranteeing discursive coherence' (Bhabha 1984, 106). Althusserian Marxism presupposes the necessity of a system of representation interpellating 'the subject in its relations to its 'real' conditions of existence' (ibid.). The 'real' becomes an imaginary relation in which ideological contradictions, gaps, and so on are repressed and excluded in order for a sense of coherence to appear. The aesthetic, as an effect of ideology, 'functions at once as the trace of the repression of the contradictions of late capitalist history as well as the textual "working over" of that repression' (107). Although Althusser's anti-Lukácsian, anti-totalising, approach in Bhabha's view has obvious advantages compared with the historicist-realist problematic, he criticises it for being functional, in the sense that it renders the potential of literary effects within a narrow set of options, corresponding, functionally, to a critical meta-discourse which seemingly is raised above the transformative work of ideological relations. Literature, in the ideological analysis, is endowed with a distancing effect, the not-said, the twisting of signification. But such a view, Bhabha argues, 'implies a normative position of equivalence where the signifier is finally absorbed into the signified, which further weakens the original claim for the literary as a relatively autonomous transformative practice. The "excess" of signification, of "fictionality", is finally normalized when it finds its referent in its function as ideological effect. This is, then, to constitute a new sign which is "historical" but no less unitary' (112).

(ibid.). Representing colonial subjects is ‘to conceive of the subject of difference, of an other history and an-other culture’ (98). To conceive this difference, it is according to Bhabha necessary to modify the understanding of the literary text to a notion that does not operate with an idea of textual representation ‘as the presentation of *different* images of the colonial, some more progressive than others’ (ibid.), but rather one that *deconstructs* the collusion of historicism and realism.<sup>44</sup>

At the heart of Bhabha’s anti-realism is the argument that realism, because of its naïve representational assumptions, cannot adequately reflect the heterogeneity of postcolonial reality. In the essay ‘The Other Question’, Bhabha argues that colonial discourse ‘employs a system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to realism’ (Bhabha 2004, 101).<sup>45</sup> Colonial discourse’s objective is in Bhabha’s view to ‘construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in

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<sup>44</sup> Similar to Bhabha, Catherine Belsey’s Althusserian account of realism (in the book *Critical Practice*) – as an irredeemably compromised form (of false consciousness and bad faith, promoting the illusion of an intelligible, meaningful, transparent, stable, unchangeable, homogeneous, and essentialised image of reality) – is simultaneously followed by an outline of a radical mode of textual resistance, namely the underpinnings of an ‘interrogative’ modality, operating according to the same principles as the ones I discussed in relation to the modernist ethos, dominating much postcolonial literary criticism which focuses on textual aspects. There are, then, within this binary constellation, ‘those forms which tend to efface their own textuality, their existence as discourse, and those which explicitly draw attention to it’ (Belsey 2002, 47). While realism is conservative, interpellating, and reassuring, ‘certain literary modes could be seen to challenge these concepts, and to call into the question the particular complex of imaginary relations between individuals and the real conditions of their existence which helps to reproduce the present relations of production’ (62). Literature constitutes, Belsey argues, a possibility of ‘distancing’ (and, as such, similar to Spivak’s notion of ‘teleopoiesis’) – that is, a linguistic awareness that self-consciously distances itself from ‘the imaginary coherence of the text, analysing the language which is its material and the process of production which makes it a text, recognizes in the text not “knowledge”, but ideology itself in all its inconsistency and partiality’ (129); in other words, the literary, within Belsey’s theoretical framework, is to be conceived as something which stands in an *oppositional* relationship to realism (or rather, a homogenised version of realism). As Laura Moss has pointed out, Belsey seems on the one hand to argue against the idea of a fixed essence inherent in a literary text (meaning is always constructed by the reader), while on the other hand conceiving the representational modality of the realist text as one that ‘paradoxically constructs the reader’s response to the text’ (Moss 1998, 34).

<sup>45</sup> For other critical explorations of the link between realist-mimetic forms of representation and the discourse of imperialism, see Hulme (1992), Brydon and Tiffin (1993), and Said (1994). As Laura Moss observes, one of the reasons why realism has been neglected by postcolonial critics has to do with the idea that realism ‘has a history, in colonial education systems, of being used to normalize hierarchies of control, exoticize colonial cultures, and reinforce the “superiority” of British culture’ (Moss 1998, 42).

order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction' (ibid.). Having made such explicit connections, there seems to be little left to say about the potential of realism within a postcolonial context. At the same time, it would also be possible to argue that the most striking thing about Bhabha's notion of realism is how essentialised and homogenised it appears; a stereotype used as a straw man to promote the radicality of a set of arguments that are allegedly decisively different.<sup>46</sup>

Neil Lazarus's poetics of disconsolation is an attack on Bhabha's poststructuralist-oriented postcolonial perspective via an attempt to recuperate the notion of a radical aesthetics; however, what is to some extent implied in Lazarus's attempt, focusing solely on the potential of modernist literary form, is also the tacit acceptance of realism as being a compromised modality in postcolonial space. As I argued before, the way in which Lazarus attempts to dissociate his perspective from Bhabha's – in and through literary texts – reveals, despite his argument's many compelling insights, a conspicuous aesthetic blindness. It is an *aesthetic* blindness in the sense that he misrecognises what has been one of the determining factors in the institutionalisation of the literary in postcolonial literary criticism; while Lazarus identifies postmodernism as being the cause, suggesting Adornian

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<sup>46</sup> In the essay 'The Other Question', Homi Bhabha describes the stereotype thus: 'The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations' (Bhabha 2004, 107). In 'Representation and the Colonial Text', Bhabha links the representational mode of realism more specifically with 'stereotype-analysis', arguing that 'In the cultural field, [stereotype-analysis] is frequently accompanied by Lukácsian emphasis on "typicality" and "totality", which shares with Leavis a preference for realist signification' (Bhabha 1984, 105). Bhabha's poststructuralist critique of realism shares similarities with the one formulated in Roland Barthes' *S/Z*, which, as Christopher Prendergast has pointed out, distanced itself from Lukácsian typicality by portraying realist representation as stereotype, 'the mark of realism's incorrigible complicity in the conservatism and bad faith of ideology. Realism, in Barthes' view, traffics in the stereotype, in culturally solidified and ideologically congealed systems of knowledge ... forms of common belief and reference that naturalize a particular construction of reality' (Prendergast 2000, 121). However, as David Carter rightly notes, the constantly reiterated critique of (a stereotypical notion of) realism 'can produce its own blindness in the form of a massive overstatement in which all realisms become one essential realism' (Carter 1992, 297).

modernism in its place, he fails to see that both paradigms, in aesthetic terms, have led to the fetishisation of a particular kind of literariness, one that creates an equivalence between anti-realist literary strategies and a set of radical political concepts. What this blind acceptance of the monopolisation of literary potential also means for Lazarus' theory is that despite his fierce critique of Bhabha's hostility toward holistic forms of social explanation, his own position proves perhaps less of an actual aesthetic alternative than it might appear; from an *aesthetic* point of view, one could even argue that the two positions merge. To rephrase Bhabha's words (referring to the critical debates between Universalists and Nationalists, both relying on naïve representational theories), the major controversy around the question of postcolonial literature (between Lazarus and Bhabha and the positions they represent respectively) 'is fought essentially on the same aesthetic ground' (Bhabha 1984, 99).<sup>47</sup> As I have argued, part of what I refer to as the modernist ethos – meaning here 'the same aesthetic ground' – should be seen as an attempt to identify the monopolising limits of a notion of the literary, as well as the consequences and implications such limits may exert upon a renewed focus on the literary dimension within a postcolonial context.

Although I question the often-made assumption in much postcolonial criticism that what has come to be seen as a representative, contemporary postcolonial literary text, e.g. a formally sophisticated or experimental literary modality, is automatically subversive or

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<sup>47</sup> Although this argument may seem as a rather totalising conflation of modernism and postmodernism, what I am referring to here is more precisely an *aesthetic discourse* (as distinct from a politic discourse) which emphasises textual self-reflexivity, formal disruption, metafiction, and other distinctly anti-realist techniques. At this level, that is to say, there are in my view only minor qualitative differences between modernist literary techniques and postmodernist literary techniques (although of course one of the ongoing debates over the last four decades is in what way modernism and postmodernism differ; in my view, there are a number of radical differences between them which suggest that they cannot be conflated, but I would maintain that these differences are less conspicuous in terms of their *opposition to realism*, and what realism has come to stand for). Focusing on *form* furthermore opens up for a critique which is different, I believe, from Benita Parry's more language-oriented critique (which is similar to Lazarus's critique) of Homi Bhabha's discourse theory (see Parry 2004, 55-74).

radical, it is important to stress that I am not proposing an argument suggesting that such textual modalities are implicitly commodified forms of literature in the age of globalisation; such an argument, I believe, would be equally problematic in connection with what I have referred to as postcolonial melancholia, because it would equally lead to a reductive appreciation of the potential of the literary within a postcolonial context.

What I *am* arguing, however, is that we need to return to a revaluation of the notion of the literary in postcolonial studies precisely with the intention of foregrounding an aesthetic potential that is formulated against the background of specific, political problematics to which postcolonial literary texts, as *literary* texts, respond. To foreground this aesthetic potential, I argue, would also necessitate a broadening of the narrow aesthetic paradigm which tacitly operates in much contemporary postcolonial criticism, that is, *include* aesthetic attention to so-called conventional modalities such as for example realism.

This exploration, however, should not be seen as an attempt to formulate another generalising theory about the literary dimension in postcolonial literary texts, which can be applied to all the world's postcolonial contexts, but rather an attempt to point out *why* we need to revalue the postcolonial aesthetic dimension within the academic discipline of postcolonial studies, and to question the potentials and consequences of different aesthetic value-codifications in postcolonial literary criticism. I argue that insofar as one attempts to broaden the narrow aesthetic paradigm that tacitly dominates the field of postcolonial studies, it would allow us to approach the dimension of the literary in ways that otherwise would have remained barred and closed off, that is to say, a dimension of the literary 'liberated' from its institutionalised readings and imposed imperatives. It is precisely in this sense that the literary, as I argued in the previous chapter, may constitute an important



resource simultaneously informing the postcolonial as well as the other way around; a risk, revealing or measuring the blind spots of the postcolonial field, but also a potential to move beyond the paralysing condition of an increasingly self-fixated discipline haunted by melancholia.

### **The Other Question: Realism as Straw Man**

It would be of importance to develop an actual *defence* of the aesthetic potential of realism as such in contemporary critical discourse; however, this chapter is primarily oriented toward an exploration of some of the underlying, ideologically-coded reasons for what seems to be an inability to read, in an aesthetically sensitive way, the mode of realism today.<sup>48</sup> What we need is first of all to foreground some of the trajectories through which realism has become essentialised as a target for various allegedly radical critiques, and secondly to clarify the reasons why realism has been treated in this way, before one attempts to ‘restore’ a model of reading which addresses, in an aesthetically sophisticated way, some of the possibilities and risks this representational mode may involve within a postcolonial perspective.

Bruce Robbins has wondered ‘why it is that the construction of an argument in our discipline so often relies on using “naïve realism” as a negative or scapegoat term that a

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<sup>48</sup> Within a postcolonial context, Laura Moss has defended realism in her unpublished doctoral dissertation ‘An Infinity of Alternate Realities: Reconfiguring Realism in Postcolonial Theory and Fiction’. In her article ‘The Plague of Normality’, which restates the main argument of her dissertation, Laura Moss expresses misgivings about the current theoretical situation in postcolonial studies: ‘In spite of many examples of recent politically charged realist texts ... the critical expectations about the form often hold that it is a reinforcement of conservative ideology’ (Moss 2000, paragraph 1). It should be stressed here, however, that there would be little or no point in attempting to recuperate a positive understanding of aesthetic realism while simultaneously producing an equally demonising image of experimental and anti-representational forms of literature, since this would only repeat the binary realist-antirealist model, and thus reinforce some of the problems underlying the current directions of postcolonial literary studies. As Gerald Graff argues, many defenders of realism have done the notion of realism a disservice by narrowing the range of formal characteristics down to a very limited number of conventions, which made it all too easy for anti-realists to dismiss realism as ideology (see Graff 1979, 11-12).

given author, text, period, or genre can be shown to rise sophisticatedly and self-consciously above' (Robbins 1993, 27). There is, I believe, an element of self-legitimation, a formulaic way of evoking criticality or radicality per reflex, embedded in this sort of argumentation which dominates much postcolonial criticism today. And if the modality of realism indeed still is a popular and widely used literary choice for many postcolonial writers, it seems that we have arrived at an unsatisfactory situation, in which we are unable to *read* critically, that is to say without moralising, condemning or using as a negative mirror image, the mode of realism in literary terms.<sup>49</sup>

Gayatri Spivak, as we saw earlier, argued for example that insofar as critics read non-western texts as realist, this was often due to 'a lack of acquaintance with the language of the original' (Spivak 1988b, 267), which may of course be a valid point, but simultaneously leaves a number of questions open regarding the possibility of finding any aesthetic or formal significance in the mode of realism. Within this context, one might specify Peter Hallward's comment that postcolonial literary criticism has surprisingly little to say 'about literature proper' (Hallward 2001, 334-335) – to how surprisingly little it has to say about *literary realism*. 'Why', asks David Carter in the article 'Tasteless Subjects: Postcolonial Literary Criticism, Realism and the Subject of Taste', 'is realism not to its

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<sup>49</sup> In a similar line of argument, Arun P. Mukherjee writes: 'I am worried by the postmodernist tendency to valorize antirealist fiction. When critics like Catherine Belsey and Linda Hutcheon suggest that antirealist fiction "denaturalizes" what we had taken to be real and this warns us against being sucked into the illusionist trap set by realist presentation by constantly drawing attention to its process ... I feel like telling them that after a while, the metafiction of postmodernism stop having that effect because of our increasing familiarity with their stylistic manoeuvres. Secondly, for those of us who never experienced realism as a dominant form, the "denaturalizing" of metafiction does not affect us in the same way. Thirdly, I do not believe that there is any necessary link between autoreflexive fiction and right politics' (Mukherjee 1990, 4). Similarly, albeit in a different context, Gerald Graff has criticised the valuation of modernist literature and techniques of defamiliarisation, at the expense of realism (see Graff 1979, 70-73). In Graff's view, 'Anti-mimetic theories derive from an understandable but distorted reaction to the loss of the sense of reality' (9). As a point in case regarding Mukherjee's and Graff's reservations about the uncritical emphasis on modernist irony, one may think of Linda Hutcheon's rather problematic notion of the postcolonial mode of irony as a process undermining the binary paradigm of colonialism (see Hutcheon 1991, 176).

taste?’ (Carter 1992, 294). Carter argues that although postcolonial literary criticism indeed *can* talk about realism, it is equally the case that realism is rarely *seen* as realism but rather as something else, such as colonial romance or fantasy. As a field constituting itself somehow coming *after* the bourgeois institutions of aestheticism, such as liberal-humanist or universalist criticism, postcolonial studies nevertheless, Carter believes, operates with a powerful aesthetics ‘which cannot be named, which is a tasteless subject in the circles where postcolonialism is spoken’ (292). Interrogating the framework of this silently operating postcolonial aesthetic, Carter notes (similarly to what I argued earlier) a number of selective restraints, embodied in an ideal of preferred literary modalities, allegedly being textually subversive and transgressive. Postcolonial criticism performs the task of identifying and describing these textual operations of transgression and subversion, thus in an implicit way prescriptively outlining an ethics of how to become an ‘ideal’ postcolonial reader, using the unspoken, underlying aesthetic paradigm of modernist and postmodernist textual modalities as ‘evidencing’ emancipatory politics, whose significance becomes all the more illuminating by a simultaneous operation that essentialises the mode of realism into one, stereotypical, demonised, counter-version. Realism, within this construction, in which textual radicality automatically is seen as equivalent to political radicality, is thus reduced to a mode of production which does not ‘provide the same pay-offs for the same amount of investment’; the realist text, Carter argues, ‘presents a dull and resistant surface to the postcolonial critic when held alongside the glamour (the politics and the erotics) or wrestling with the earlier and later texts’ (296).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> By ‘earlier’ Carter is referring to early, pre-modern colonial texts which usually are seen as complicit with imperialism, and, as such, ‘can be made to function as repressed foreknowledge’ (Carter 1992, 296) within colonial discourse analysis. Carter refers to the realist texts being produced in between these earlier colonial texts (colonial romances) and later modernist/postmodernist postcolonial textual modalities. His overall

Postcolonial realism, as understood by some of the dominant theorists in the literary field, first of all constitutes a problem because it apparently promotes the naïve illusion of an unmediated, and thus ‘authentic’ or ‘original’ (re)presentation of the experience of otherness, whereas in fact it furthers false consciousness, hiding the ideological underpinnings of an imperialist discourse. ‘Realism’, Harry E. Shaw woefully notes, ‘has become not a form that can tell us about life in the modern world, but a form that can tell us nothing useful, and doesn’t even know it’ (Shaw 1999, 3). The main thrust of this anti-realist position, as represented for example by Homi Bhabha, goes like this: since ‘meaning’ is not established via an assumed referential function of words as such, but via the *differential* relations between words within a particular system, the idea of a textual discourse referring mimetically to some external, extra-linguistic, socio-historical reality is untenable. And because the realist text apparently wants its readers to *believe* in a pre-given, truthful structure of reality, by referring to it in terms of a one-to-one correspondence – a kind of mechanical or expressive causality in the Althusserian sense – the realist text is seen as naturalising and reinforcing an ideologically compromised discourse.

But as Shaw rhetorically asks: ‘Should we assume that, unless a novel gives primary attention to metafictional maneuvering, it is disguising something?’ (8). In the tradition of expressive realism (or the Leavisite notion of realism – the one Bhabha attacks), there is arguably a mimetic desire for illusionism and closeness to reality, or what one could see as a desire for truthful depiction of reality, although this is only one among many definitions of realism, which, as I will attempt to make clear in the next chapter, is perhaps less helpful in terms of an exploration of the potential of realism within a postcolonial

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suggestion, that realism in postcolonial studies is constructed as a ‘tasteless subject’, corresponds to my argument that the aesthetics of realist form constitutes a blind spot within the field of postcolonial studies, although my concerns regard late-twentieth century practices of realism.

context. What I am criticising in this chapter is the automatic assumption that expressive realism is the *only* conception of realism.

On the basis of this homogenised conception of realism, anti-realists have typically defined the *literary* as a process self-consciously deconstructing its own linguistic structures, that is, a process which is formulated precisely as a *critique* of realism. In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson refers to what he calls ‘ideologies of the text’, arguing that many post-Saussurean theories

construct a straw man or inessential term – variously called the “readerly” or the “realistic” or the “referential” text – over against which the essential term – the “writerly” or modernist or “open” text, *écriture* or textual productivity – is defined and with which it is seen as a decisive break. (Jameson 2002a, 2)<sup>51</sup>

The post-Saussurean basis on which for example Bhabha implicitly positions his argument against realism – i.e. that realism necessarily (and illusorily) insists on a natural, referential correspondence between reality and literary signs – is valid only to a limited extent, capturing only in a very restricted sense the nature of the project of literary realism.<sup>52</sup> As Harry E. Shaw for example has argued, there seems to be no particular reason why we should assume that

any realist theory of language must deny the existence of linguistic “arbitrariness” ... Indeed, there are the best possible grounds for believing that if language didn’t possess an element of arbitrariness, it would be useless for the realist enterprise, or any other. Because realism is centrally interested in social relations and the ways societies move through time, it couldn’t possibly make do with a language that limited itself to the task of sticking labels on things. (Shaw 1999, 56)

Literary realism is not necessarily incompatible with a post-Saussurean philosophy of language; nor is realism, I would argue, necessarily complicit with certain capitalist or

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<sup>51</sup> For an elaborated discussion of this argument, see also Jameson’s essay ‘The Ideology of the Text’ in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986*, vol. 1; 17-71. Moreover, see Jameson’s discussion of realism in ‘The Existence of Italy’ in *Signatures of the Visible*; 155-229

<sup>52</sup> It is, for example, noteworthy in this connection to mention that none of the major realist poetics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – e.g. Lukács, Auerbach, Watt, or Bakhtin – are based on a notion of a purely referential or mimetic language, nor do they assume that there exists a full correspondence between the text and its context.

Eurocentric ideologies *per se*, to the extent that Bhabha insists.<sup>53</sup> Criticising Catherine Belsey's poststructuralist attack on realism (as outlined in the book *Critical Practice*), Shaw argues that she overrates the significance of linguistic referentiality:

it's made to seem that all kinds of important issues have been settled *in advance* if we decide that reliable reference is or is not possible ... Reference is always associated with other linguistic means in its dealings with the world; it acts as one component of many packages ... the notion that there could be a "referential language," or even that language could approach a state of more or less pure referentiality, is misleading. When we refer to something, the important work remains to be done. Reference is the beginning, not the end, of a process that may or may not eventuate in knowledge of the various worlds in which we live. (58-59)<sup>54</sup>

Undoubtedly there are moments during the encounter with a realist text when we 'forget' that we are reading a *text* and that we are dealing with *language* (and the fallacies of linguistic representation). But this 'illusionism' is not only, or even specifically, something

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<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, as I noted earlier, realism has arguably been an integral part of various colonial discursive strategies, but even such a historically supported argument would not necessarily deem realist form complicit with colonialism *per se*. Moreover, one would also do a revaluation of realism a disservice, I believe, by arguing that it can be read in terms of poststructuralist language games (such as for example J. Hillis Miller has done, however brilliantly); even if, as I have argued, one agrees that realism is not necessarily a closed and totalising form, I think it is vital that one pays attention to the *specific* potentials of realism, as *distinct* from more fragmented and explicitly self-conscious modalities. Catherine Belsey and Homi Bhabha, among others, refer to realism as an *outmoded* stage in terms of which postcolonial literature is defined chronologically as a mode of writing coming *after* this stage (see also Anthony Kwame Appiah's notion of 'post-realism' in Appiah 1992, 150). To Laura Moss, the 'problem lies in privileging contemporary writing as a state beyond realism' (Moss 1998, 52), an argument with which I agree. In the subsequent chapters, I will attempt to show how literary realism may be restored within postcolonial studies, not in terms of a rigid chronological schematic, but as an important modality within *contemporary* formations of postcolonial writing.

<sup>54</sup> See Robert Scholes' *Textual Power* and Ora Avni's *The Resistance of Reference* for critiques of the poststructuralist notion of linguistic referentiality. See also Roy Bhaskar (1989) for an epistemological-realist discussion of the metaphorical correspondence between thought and objects. Gerald Graff argues that in the post-Saussurean critique of linguistic reference, the concept is often unjustly 'stripped of whatever richness it might possess and reduced to something trivial. This is done by equating reference with "one-to-one correspondence," that is, to a crudely Platonic or Lockean conception of words as *pointers* to things ... If meanings originate merely "from the differential relations among the words themselves" within purely artificial sign systems, *then* their reference to external reality can no longer be taken for granted. In other words, literature must be fiction because all language is fiction – though it is only literature that calls attention to its fictive nature' (Graff 1979, 20). Eysteinsson, with modernism as his subject, would agree with Graff's insistence on the importance of the referential function in literature (as opposed to what Eysteinsson calls 'the poetic language fallacy'), arguing that 'the factor that helps us to determine whether an utterance is poetic or not is ... the sphere of the referential function, namely the *context* of the utterance. We always need to be aware of this context to know whether a text is "literary." ... Even if we understand the message to be focusing on itself, it is *referring* to its language as social reality' (Eysteinsson 1990, 200). For defences of the referential function in postcolonial literature (and for critiques of Homi Bhabha's and Gayatri Spivak's textual approaches), see the essay-collection *After Europe*, edited by Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin.

which can be said to characterise the mode of realism, and it cannot simply be juxtaposed with bad faith or ideology.<sup>55</sup> There are many different and complex reasons underlying the functions of a given modality's assumed illusionism, and in the realist text, as I will go on to show in the following chapters, these functions cannot be reduced to 'the single aim of escaping or seeming to escape mediation' (50).<sup>56</sup> To lose the dimension of illusionism in the fictive text is to lose a very important aspect of literary experience; as Jorgen Dines Johansen observes, 'Readers imprisoned on the meta-level of reading should be pitied, not envied' (Johansen 2002, 174).

The inability to think beyond the monopolisation of what I refer to as the modernist ethos is within a feminist context attacked by Rita Felski, who criticises what she sees as the myth of a revolutionary modernist aesthetics, arguing that while realism tends to *dominate* feminist writings, most critics have been eager to promote the argument that experimental art provides 'the necessary corollary to a progressive politics through its subversion of existing structures of representation which are taken over unquestioned into

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<sup>55</sup> Drawing on Althusser's and Macherey's ideology critiques, Belsey argues that the realist reader is interpellated as a free, autonomous, and unified subject placed in an illusory position to judge, without any restraints, an inter-subjective value of 'truth' as reflected by and in the text; the realist text obscures, represses, and smoothes out gaps, plurality, and contradictions, feigning a transcendental coherence or totality via its typically impersonal, omniscient mode of narration, its effacement of the materiality of its discursive, signifying practice, its essentialising and homogenising character portraits, and its teleologically determined plot striving for a restoration of an 'intelligible' order and harmony. Harry E. Shaw argues that such a view constructs two different types of readers: 'we promote some to the status of knowing (tenured?) readers by envisioning a group of very differently endowed "normal" readers, to whom the ruses we are able to decode are in the first instance directed. This is a common enough tactic in many kinds of criticism ... Expert reading becomes synonymous with unmasking, and ... any other experience of the realist text sinks to the level of mass hypnosis' (Shaw 1999, 34).

<sup>56</sup> In the essay 'Modernism's Last Post', Stephen Slemon raises concerns about 'Western post-modernist readings' which in his view 'can so overvalue the anti-referential or deconstructive energetics of postcolonial texts that they efface the important recuperative work that is also going on within them' (Slemon 1991a, 7), a work which often takes place in *realist* texts (however, I agree with Laura Moss that Slemon's notion of realism – as a form of parody – is less convincing in terms of the possibilities and risks that this modality may activate within a postcolonial context; see Moss 1998, 57). In the next chapter I will attempt to reconstruct a notion of realism, via Lukács, which precisely pays attention to the 'recuperative' work in realist texts.

the realist text' (Felski 1989, 156).<sup>57</sup> According to Felski, the allegedly revolutionary and subversive potential of experimental inventions is questionable, and in any case short-lived. The shock-effects of the avant-garde experiments, Felski observes, eventually become 'venerated exhibits in the museum' (159), while simultaneously raising the stakes to ever more mystifying, exotic, detached and isolated gestures of outbidding, aesthetic expressions. This fetishisation of experimental form within literary criticism has in Felski's view led to an unsatisfactory situation where whole industries within academia are occupied with 'the exegesis of modern art, which acquires an enigmatic aura that can be deciphered only by the expert' (158),<sup>58</sup> while the consequences of this development merely echo 'the fetishization of novelty and fashion which is the hallmark of a capitalist consumer culture built upon constant innovation and instant obsolescence' (160).<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> That the field of women's writing in general has tended to prefer a realist mode of representation, rather than modernist aesthetics of negativity, must, according to Felski, be seen in relation to a concrete historical context, in which the unfolding of a politically visible and unambiguous praxis was required to mobilise a broad, heterogeneous field of common but marginalised interests. According to Felski, much criticism is dominated by the modernist notion that a literary text's experimenting, self-problematizing, formal properties in themselves transcend, transgress, deconstruct, negate and thus criticise existing structures of hegemony, while failing to observe that this notion in itself is 'grounded in a particular historical development' (Felski 1989, 158). Simultaneously, Felski argues, the realist novel has been exposed to an unfair criticism, as always generating 'the illusion of transparency, of showing things how they really are, rather than drawing attention to its own signifying practice and the workings of ideology in the construction of meaning and the unified subject' (156). As a consequence, much feminist criticism has been developed along the lines of the idea that 'progressive' feminist literature implies formal experimentations that seek to subvert the existing hegemony. Situating herself in opposition to this view, Felski goes on to argue that the realist novel not always can be said to be a 'closed', conventional form, conveying a uniform and transparent meaning, by referring to the massive amounts of different readings of 19<sup>th</sup> Century realist novels that are continuously produced; indeed, she says, 'realist works may allow for a *greater* richness and diversity of interpretation than modern experimental texts, which are interpreted with monotonous regularity as metalinguistic propositions about the impossibility of representation' (157).

<sup>58</sup> In the essay 'The Role of Aesthetics in Cultural Studies', Felski similarly argues that the professionalisation of literary criticism in academia basically means that 'literary criticism teaches certain techniques of interpretation and ranks highly the works that reward such techniques. It teaches students to decode works according to accepted parameters and places a high premium on aesthetic difficulty ... Thanks to modern ideas about the primacy of form and the linking of art to other artworks rather than to life, art is often defined as the province of specialists' (Felski 2005, 35).

<sup>59</sup> The idea, Felski adds (reiterating Jameson's point about postmodernism), that the experimenting form of art is politically more radical than a conventional mode is undermined by the fact that its techniques to a large extent have been absorbed by mass- and popular culture; commercials, music videos, TV-soaps, are all using techniques of self-reflexivity, diegetic interruptions, narrative fragmentations, anti-mimetic exaggerations and



To Felski, the potential of aesthetic radicalism stems from the contextually specific *interaction* between the work and its readers as located within a specific cultural paradigm – rather than from the work itself. She dismisses the notion of a literary historiography that is driven by what she calls ‘ritualized forms of transgression’ (159). Instead, Felski attempts to *re-situate* the political potential of the literary text from its intrinsic attributes to its structural relations within a practice-oriented set of contextually specific coordinates. However, if Felski’s attack on the formal fetishism of the ideology of modernism adds an important comment on the contemporary debate about the potential radicalism of literature, her own alternative is also one that ultimately seeks to end a more elaborated discussion of the specificity of literary form. She dismisses both realist and modernist aesthetics as being normative conventions, arguing that the critical focus on the differences between them has overshadowed the importance of culturally mediated frameworks of reception. What Felski has in mind is a *repoliticised* aesthetic sphere which, however, does not mean an aesthetics which is ‘to be interpreted as a direct reflection of the interests of a political ideology’ (175), but rather one that reinserts the literary text ‘into the sphere of everyday communicative practices’ (ibid.). This reception discourse apparently avoids reading the figures of aesthetics in purely functional terms – as ideology – while paying attention to the contextually specific ways in which literary texts may constitute ‘a site of plural signification and aesthetic pleasure which may resist as well as transmit dominant ideological positions’ (ibid.). The problem is that Felski’s definition of aesthetics here is

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so forth. One may argue that this argument is a bit crude, not attentive to the important distinctions between the specificity of either end of the spectrum of aesthetic possibilities, but Felski does raise a vital point, which illuminates the need for a renewed focus on literary form. Eysteinsson, however, argues that ‘It seems to me that while commercialism may seem bent on “refreshing” reality, its “shock” is ultimately *affirmative*; it is not out to estrange us from our familiar world ... In other words, commercials do not, however fragmentary they may appear, function as nonorganic texts, and they do not carry with them a sense of crisis in communication and meaning-production’ (Eysteinsson 1990, 223-224).

formulated on a ground which is not altogether that different from the one she has attacked, namely the poetics of 'experimental' and 'difficult' literary formal techniques; aesthetic texts are *aesthetic* insofar as they foreground their 'relative autonomy' (178), Felski argues, which they do by making a difference in a *formally explicit* way – 'in terms of their foregrounding of [the] poetic and self-referential dimension of signification, attained by means of the text's relative distance from the pragmatic constraints of everyday communicative practices' (177). That Felski includes both conventional and aesthetically self-conscious texts within her notion of a repoliticised art, changes little of the fact that on the one hand she attempts to write off the politically subversive significance of a *particular* mode of formal-experimental aesthetic expression, by politicising it as an expression of capitalist consumerism, while on the other hand advancing the argument that literature's *particular* (and particularly *aesthetic*) process of signification is generally equivalent with the characteristics of the selfsame mode of aesthetic expression.<sup>60</sup> As I have argued, to

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<sup>60</sup> In the article 'The Plague of Normality', Laura Moss presents an argument for the necessity to recuperate realism as a mode of political resistance; this, she argues, 'may occur partially through a recognition of the potential for multiple perspectives inscribed in realism rather than the assumed presentation of a singular world view in the form' (Moss 2000, paragraph 24). Whereas the potential of contemporary realism has often been aligned with a conservative, right-wing agenda, anti-mimetic fiction is often seen as representative of the postcolonial, which primarily, according to Moss, is due to the fact that the concept of 'resistance' in much contemporary postcolonial criticism has been fetishised, 'objectless' – that is to say, that it is valued *in itself*. This problematic is related to what I have referred to as postcolonial melancholia, and it furthermore stresses the need for a return to a discussion of the specificity of the 'object' of postcolonial literary criticism, namely the literary; to return to a discussion of the specificity of the literary would uncover an underlying set of *aesthetic* values, framed within a modernist ethos, which categorises realism, as Moss argues, as incapable of subversion. To Moss, postcolonial realism can, receptively, be seen as just as defamiliarising and de-reifying as it can be read as a representational mode which naturalises and objectifies ideological processes. Her alternative proposal, to recognise the multiplicity of realist form without necessarily relying on an empty postmodernist vocabulary, leaves, however, like in the case of Felski's critique, a number of questions open; it ultimately marginalises the issue of the literary to norms that are not that different from the ones advanced by anti-realist positions, in order to promote the mode of realism as a 'form for political and social engagement in postcolonial contexts' (paragraph 1). A more ambiguous attempt to situate the mode of realism in postcolonial criticism is presented in Stephen Slemon's reading of Wilson Harris' critical and fictive work, in the article 'Wilson Harris and the "Subject" of Realism'. Identifying two different reading strategies employed in the numerous approaches to Harris' texts, Slemon outlines a positivist-realist stance paralleled with a sceptical-poststructuralist perspective; both are rendered in a somewhat caricatured form, partly because they basically serve to demonstrate Slemon's argument about the critical edge in Wilson Harris' work,

defend realism by arguing that it is 'just' as resistant as modernism in an aesthetic way, while defining aesthetic value according to a modernist parameter, would nonetheless still operate on the basis of what I have referred to as the modernist ethos.

Rita Felski's, perhaps in the end slightly crude, critique of the ideology of modernism which has distorted a sense of what is *actually* being written and used outside academia, raises a number of important issues in connection with an attempt to investigate postcolonial aesthetic categories; her actual aesthetic considerations nevertheless remain frozen within a familiar rhetoric of political radicality that does not address the specificity of the aesthetic potential of realism sufficiently (such as for example Derek Attridge does in relation to the modernist text). Felski's unwillingness to think beyond this familiar rhetoric is, I believe, partly due to the fact that the traditional notion of realism, in an aesthetic sense, has been tied so closely to 19<sup>th</sup> Century bourgeois and imperialist aspirations (as we saw earlier), that insofar as realism *has* been defended in recent critical scholarship, this has primarily happened via a focus on its *socio-political* dimension, as a mode of *political* resistance.

There would be a number of historical reasons to support the importance of this perspective, such as for example the need for a functional-didactic literature in a given socio-political, postcolonial context,<sup>61</sup> but it would simultaneously leave a number of

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namely the unfolding of an aesthetic strategy which somehow merges the previous two contrasting models, thus allegedly 'transcending' the institutional restraints operating within the field of postcolonial studies.

<sup>61</sup> Benita Parry has in an essay on J.M. Coetzee observed that despite sporadic attempts to employ innovative literary forms, 'the predominant mode of the South African novel, white and black, remains social realism' (Parry 1996, 54) – with the obvious exemption of Coetzee's novels. Parry's essay also discusses the question why so many black writers have preferred realism, and lists issues such as the restricted liberal education, influenced by colonial cultural practices, as well as the functional-didactic, imperative-ideological potential of realism – to unite and organise a heterogeneous group in a common cause (see Parry 1996, 54-57). Parry here presents an argument paying attention to aspects similar to questions of resistance and mobilisation, discussed within African literary criticism and versions of early postcolonial studies; see Nkosi (1967), Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie & Madubuike, Ihechukwu (1985), Gugelberger (1985), and Harlow (1987).

important questions unanswered with regard to realism's formal-aesthetic potential, as distinct from the aesthetic potential of modernist texts. By re-politicising the notion of realism as a potential force of resistance, one could argue that such critics commit an error similar to what Fredric Jameson has seen as the 'distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not' (Jameson 2002a, 4), albeit from the other side of the divide, that is to say, by revaluing the *political* potential at the expense of the aesthetic potential, and, in this sense, *maintaining* that distinction. Jameson, having bourgeois aestheticism in mind, argues that this error is a symptom of 'the reification and privatization of contemporary life', because such a 'distinction reconfirms that structural, experiential, and conceptual gap between the public and the private, between the social and the psychological, or the political and the poetic' (ibid.), which is the hallmark of late capitalist society. While one may agree with Jameson's categorical statement, 'that there is nothing that is not social and historical – indeed, that everything is “in the last analysis” political' (5), the solution is, I am arguing, not to revalorise, in order to defend, the notion of realism in terms of its political potential solely, since this would only reinforce the very distinction which Jameson, in the first place, saw as a symptom of commodification.<sup>62</sup>

As I have argued hitherto, there is a need to question the modernist ethos, especially within the context of postcolonial studies, whose identity increasingly has become based on a fetishised notion of a politically radical commitment to critiques of modernity. There is a need to question this assumption, not merely because the construction of realism in this model is highly reductive and simplifying, but also because the *need* to configure realism as

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<sup>62</sup> What I see here as Felski's error of revalorising the political at the expense of the aesthetic cannot, however, be said to be Jameson's error by implication.

a scapegoat in itself is revealing.<sup>63</sup> In the next chapter as well as in my subsequent readings of selected postcolonial novels, I will develop and explore a notion of literary realism which is different from the perspective of the modernist ethos; a notion which is broad enough to be relevant not only in relation to distinctly realist forms, but also other literary forms. For now, I want to come back to the issue I raised a little earlier, namely *why* there seems to be a need to configure realism as a scapegoat. That is to say, I want to discuss the question why realism has provoked such reactions, in contemporary theory generally, and in postcolonial studies particularly. If we assume that the construction of realism is in fact reductive and simplifying, we need to find out what the ‘scandal’ of realism more precisely entails – what it is that makes it necessary to circumscribe and misread realism’s potential to the extent that we have seen. What I have been alluding to so far is that the aesthetic codifications tacitly operating within the dominant postcolonial perspective, constructing a grossly reductive way of reading realist modality, can be seen as a symptom of deeper, repressed issues which precisely are related to the dimension of the aesthetic or the literary as it emerges within postcolonial studies. That is to say, I am arguing that the dimension of realism ‘marks the spot where something painful is buried’ (Jameson 1989b, 118).

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<sup>63</sup> Obviously I am referring to realism here as a rather homogeneous entity which does not take into account the *particularity* of various forms of realism; for the moment I will refer to realism as basically this ‘other’ of the preferred aesthetic modalities in postcolonial theory – that is, as an inessential term, or a critical fiction – in order to highlight the constructedness of this image.

## Critical Fictions

The previous exposition of some of the critiques formulated against (a homogenised notion of) realism may suggest that there exists a need for a 'mechanism' by which the field of postcolonial studies, as a radical discourse, can differentiate itself from alleged non-radical positions. One might argue that the way in which postcolonial studies defines itself as a radical critique (via a preference for a particular kind of literary modality) must be seen as intimately connected with another process of differentiation, namely the foregrounding of the potential of anti-mimetic textual strategies, allegedly different from (or differentiating itself against the background of) a homogenised notion of the realist-mimetic text. This need for differentiation may be seen as the symptom of a deeper-lying issue, related to the complex process of legitimisation – i.e. the legitimisation of postcolonial studies as a radical discourse, different from colonial, imperial and Eurocentric discourse.<sup>64</sup>

In the essay 'The Object of Post-Criticism', Gregory Ulmer proposes an interesting thesis regarding the problematic, and often blurred, relationship between text and criticism within the discourse of post-structuralism – or what he calls post-criticism. Ulmer argues

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<sup>64</sup> As David Carter observes, postcolonial studies has a troubled 'relationship to its own immediate past. This is the past called "Commonwealth Literature" ... postcolonial criticism cannot refuse to acknowledge this past (for the "first" generation it was the moment careers were launched). It can, though, project its self-transcendence, one task of the rhetoric (and the dialectic) that produces the preferred model of the postcolonial text. What the new postcolonial criticism has revealed, of course, is realism's complicity with imperialism – that is, with universalism, essentialism, positivism, individualism, modernity, historicity, and so on. Here is the most sophisticated form of postcolonial distaste for realism, for it can reveal the complicity of literature with forms of history and anthropology and the colonial subject's complicity with his/her own subjection' (Carter 1992, 297). The *need* to be radically differentiated from colonial discourse (and, by implication, differentiated from commonwealth literature's naivety), which at the same time is a desire for radicality, is also one of the reasons why realism has become one of the favourite targets for postcolonial critiques. The homogenised notion of realism functions as an important component within the identity-construction of postcolonial studies as a radical discipline. One may also compare this need for differentiation or dissociation with what Gerald Graff has seen as the 'need of the humanities to dissociate themselves from anything that might be associated with bourgeois culture [which] not only requires the liquidation of mimetic literary models but virtually anything suggestive of an objective truth-claim, whether in literature, criticism, or any other form of discourse ... The aim of literary theorizing becomes not to understand the distinctive ways in which literature deals with experience so much as to exonerate literature (and the literary theorist) from social complicity' (Graff 1979, 25-26).

that this relationship can be seen as the symptom of a 'crisis' of representation, which echoes the crisis of representation that apparently took place at the beginning of the twentieth century, that is, the paradigm shift from mimetic realism to modernism and avant-garde aesthetics: 'Criticism now is being transformed in the same way that literature and the arts were transformed by the avant-garde movements in the early decades of this century' (Ulmer 1985, 83).<sup>65</sup> Post-criticism, Ulmer argues, parasitically mimics many of the techniques of avant-garde, such as collage, allegory and montage, because it is ultimately faced with epistemological problematics of a similar kind, albeit problematics not emerging so much from the relationship between the world and the text, as much as between text and text.

Ulmer's thesis about the relationship between *criticism* and *literature* opens up a perspective that may illuminate how we are to understand this relationship within a postcolonial context, albeit in a slightly different way. I want to argue that what Ulmer sees as a displaced or deferred 'crisis of representation' (initially emerging as an aesthetic response to the problematic of mimetic realism and subsequently as a critical response to the literary or aesthetic text), may be seen as redefined within the dominant postcolonial vocabulary – a vocabulary which mimics techniques of anti-representational modalities, *not* because it suffers from a (second) crisis of representation, but rather the opposite; that is to say, because it *desires* a crisis of representation.

We need to follow the trace of this desire more thoroughly, I believe, because it is intimately related to melancholia – and hence the dimension of the literary. The suspicion that postcolonial studies has not avoided commodifying otherness in the global market, as a

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<sup>65</sup> See Fredric Jameson's "'End of Art" or "End of History"?' in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* for the argument that the emergence of Theory in the Sixties seems to have supplanted the meaning, as well as taken over the function, of traditional literature.

consequence of the field's institutionalisation in recent years, has produced, as I mentioned earlier, what certain critics have seen as an atmosphere of melancholia; melancholia, as I outlined in chapter one, refers to the sense of a loss of postcolonial criticality, a sense of impotence in relation to the struggle against actual, political and social contradictions governing the global development.

As we have seen, both mourning and melancholia are according to Freud intimately related to some sort of painful loss; but whereas in the first case a real, external and specifiable loss actually occurs, the latter case is more ambivalent. The melancholic process is ambivalent not only because the lost object (real or imaginary) is difficult to determine – the loss has been withdrawn from consciousness – but also because the process is pleasurable as well as painful (in the sense that the melancholic ego narcissistically internalises the energy of his or her libido within the ego, and in that way identifying as well as becoming unified with the lost object). The melancholic ego regresses to an infantile, oral or cannibalistic phase of the libido stage, 'devouring' the lost object as a way of preserving it as an ego-ideal.

There seems to be an act of faithfulness involved in the melancholic process – the pathological insistence on preserving, at all costs, the lost object, which we do not find in the process of mourning; in the latter case, the subject mourns his or her loss as a way of coming to terms with its permanent absence, an absence which the melancholic subject categorically denies by restoring an image of the lost object, as an object of self-identification. Yet there is another side to this project of restoration which makes the melancholic process even more ambivalent. At one point, Freud observes that in the melancholic process of mourning 'there is a loss of a more ideal kind', that is, the object *as*



*such* may not in fact be lost but may have 'been lost as an object of love' (Freud 1968, 245) – hence the ambivalent love-hate relationship to the phantom object, as it is restored within the ego itself.

This definition of melancholia raises, however, the question as to whether melancholic loss in fact can be described as loss at all. Freud writes:

Melancholia ... borrows some of its features from mourning, and the others from the process of regression from narcissistic object-choice to narcissism. It is on the one hand, like mourning, a reaction to the real loss of a loved object; but over and above this, it is marked by a determinant which is absent in normal mourning or which, if it is present, transforms the latter into pathological mourning. (250)

What is this melancholic 'determinant which is absent in normal mourning'? To say that it is the process of regression from narcissistic object-choice to narcissism seems only to point at the *effects*, rather than what actually determines or causes the process of melancholia as such; and if we take the reaction to the real loss of a loved object as the cause, then melancholia does indeed appear as a pathological development of mourning, which, however, would only send us back to the problems that Freud detected in the beginning of his essay, namely that in melancholia, as in contrast to mourning, 'one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost' (245). The 'determinant', which is absent in mourning, must be present in melancholia, but in a way that is not clear – that is, one may see it as an 'absent cause', a cause that remains at an unconscious level. But an object-loss that is unconscious, which remains an unknown factor in Freud's theory, also seems to raise the question as to whether one from an overall perspective can see melancholia as a 'pathological' development of mourning – as a pathological response to 'real loss' – at all. It also seems to open up the possibility of seeing the *effects*, the process of regression from narcissistic object-choice to narcissism, as in fact preceding the cause, the reaction to real loss.

Giorgio Agamben has explored this possible reading, arguing that ‘melancholia offers the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object’. Within this perspective, the purpose of melancholia would be to

make viable an appropriation in a situation in which none is really possible. From this point of view, melancholy would be not so much the regressive reaction to the loss of the love object as the imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object appear as if lost. If the libido behaves *as if* a loss had occurred although *nothing* has in fact been lost, this is because the libido stages a simulation where what cannot be lost because it has never been possessed appears as lost, and what could never be possessed because it had never perhaps existed may be appropriated insofar as it is lost. (Agamben 1993, 20)

The melancholic ego, in Agamben’s interpretation, may appropriate a real, but unattainable object, by rendering it as lost; what is lost is not the object as such, but rather its unattainableness, by which the melancholic ego can *claim* and *possess* it in a phantasmagorical sense – that is, only insofar as it remains lost.

In one sense, we may see this strange logic of the melancholic process as an extreme fidelity to the object. This would explain, as Slavoj Žižek argues (following Agamben’s interpretation of melancholia), the reason why melancholia today is generally preferred to mourning:

In the process of loss, there is always a remainder that cannot be integrated through the work of mourning, and the ultimate fidelity to this remainder. Mourning is a kind of betrayal, the second killing of the (lost) object, while the melancholic subject remains faithful to the lost object, refusing to renounce his or her attachment to it. This story can be given a multitude of twists [like the] postcolonial/ethnic one, which holds that when ethnic groups enter capitalist processes of modernization and are under the threat that their specific legacy will be swallowed up by the new global culture, they should not renounce their tradition through mourning, but retain the melancholic attachment to their lost roots. (Žižek 2000, 658)

To Žižek, this contemporary preference for melancholia constitutes, however, an ideologically suspect act, a ‘logic of objective cynicism’, because it allows the possibility of pretending to be faithful to a beloved object, ‘while fully participating in the global capitalist game’ (659); that is to say, melancholia in this sense constitutes a legitimising

device, securing a façade of faithfulness to a particular imperative, while at the same time allowing one to pursue other, ideologically more suspect, trajectories of desire.

The melancholic ego, Žizek argues, confuses lack with loss: ‘insofar as the object-cause of desire is originally, in a constitutive way, lacking, melancholy interprets this lack as a loss, as if the lacking object was once possessed and then lost’ (659-660). Obscured in this manoeuvre is the original lack of the object, by which the melancholic ego can elevate it to an absolute ideal, albeit as lost, but nevertheless possessed in its loss.<sup>66</sup> ‘For this reason’, Žizek writes, ‘melancholy is not simply the attachment to the lost object but the attachment to the very original gesture of its loss’ (660). What fascinates the melancholic is not the restoration of the object as such, but rather the *loss* of the object itself; as lost, the object, along with its attributed qualities, is melancholically restored and retained (but in a phantasmagorical sense) in a ‘legitimate’ way. When the melancholic refuses to accomplish the work of mourning, the very opposite happens: ‘a faked spectacle of the excessive, superfluous mourning for an object even before this object is lost’ (661).<sup>67</sup>

If one connects these modifying thoughts on melancholia to my previous discussion (in chapter one) of the atmosphere of melancholia – the mounting sense of the loss of a radical identity in the field of contemporary postcolonial studies, and which I saw as the symptom of a loss of the ability to read the literary in its singularity – another dimension of the melancholic process occurs. This other dimension is not so much related to an actual object-loss, as to what can be seen as a ‘translation’ of an initial lack (into loss), a lack that

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<sup>66</sup> That is, a temporal, finite object is elevated to something absolute or eternal, which can only be possessed *as lost*.

<sup>67</sup> It follows then, via this paradoxical trajectory, that ‘the mourner mourns the lost object and kills it a second time through symbolizing its loss, while the melancholic is not simply the one who is unable to renounce the object but rather the one who kills the object a second time (treats it as lost) before the object is actually lost’ (Žizek 2000, 662).

is covered precisely via a process of pseudo-mourning (i.e. melancholia in Agamben's and Žižek's sense), which *precedes* and *anticipates* an actual object-loss, whereby this desired object, the singular and unverifiable margin of criticality, can be fixated, possessed, and reclaimed.

Here it is necessary to take a closer look at what this 'lack' more concretely implies. Throughout this chapter, I have focused on recent critical works voicing, on the one hand, dissatisfaction with the field's increasingly institutionalised and homogenised critical identity, as reflected in repetitive, narrow and predictable readings of postcolonial texts, and, on the other hand, calls for a greater attention to the aesthetic dimension of postcolonial studies' object of study (as a way of moving beyond the impasse of institutionalisation). These recent works constitute vital attempts to resituate a renewed attention toward literary form within postcolonial studies; however, my argument is that the literary has precisely not been *absent* in a strict sense in postcolonial criticism, but rather that it has operated tacitly, as an institutionalised paradigm or mechanism codifying and legitimising certain correspondences between particular aesthetic strategies and particular political imperatives (i.e. what I have referred to as the modernist ethos). That is to say, what I have been arguing is that the dimension of the literary has not been absent in postcolonial literary criticism, but rather that it has been restricted and defined in a highly codified way, to the extent that it has become a *critical fiction*. The critical codification of the dimension of the literary, as I argued, must be seen in relation to an ideologically coded desire for legitimisation (i.e. the tautological, interpretive mechanism by which selected literary texts are read and canonised only insofar as they confirm the claims of the postcolonial). What I see as the excessive, and to some extent paranoid and hysterical,

amount of self-criticism and constant calls for self-interrogation in much contemporary postcolonial criticism may be seen as legitimising acts that are to be confirmed and reinforced precisely via the phantasmagorical or melancholic construction of the figures of the literary (i.e. self-consciously and self-critically postcolonial and textual modalities).

It follows here that there is a danger built into recent critical attempts to trace postcolonial melancholia while at the same time calling for a renewed focus on the aesthetic dimension, insofar as this focus merely repeats, albeit no longer *tacitly* but *manifestly*, what I have referred to as the institutionalised paradigm or mechanism that makes it possible and legitimate to accept, in an uncritical way, equivalences between particular aesthetic strategies and particular political imperatives. Within this phantasmagorical (re)construction, the allegedly radical identity of postcolonial studies is still confirmed and exemplified through the literary text, as one of the primary ‘objects’ of otherness, albeit in a manifestly aesthetic way; a literary text chosen and canonised as being representative of the postcolonial imperative only insofar as this text in turn *exemplifies* the orthodoxies of the dominant postcolonial vocabulary – and in that way *legitimising* this vocabulary in a tautological, interpretive circle.

The *symptom* of melancholia – the suspicion that the field of postcolonial studies has not avoided commodifying otherness in the global market – has produced calls for renewed attention toward the figures of the literary. But what I am arguing is that this symptom is first of all related to the complex relationship between postcolonial studies as an academic field on the one hand, and an ideologically transfigured notion of the literary on the other hand; a relationship which to some extent is reinforced, albeit in a manifest way, through recent works of postcolonial criticism, as we have seen. Postcolonial critical

works calling for a greater attention to the aesthetic dimension may manifest an aesthetic codification which in various ways has already been operating in the field, albeit tacitly, and thus further reinforce some of the problems that I see as the causes of institutionalisation and homogenisation. That is to say, a reinforcement which necessarily must *preclude* or *repress* alternative ways of conceiving the uncanny potential of the literary, such as for example the aesthetic-formal mode of realism, while on the other hand suggesting that certain modalities – which in explicit ways are hybrid, heterogeneous, subversive, challenging, and dispersive – represent *the* postcolonial literary mode (confirmed through the dominating postcolonial vocabulary).

What is absent in this critical construction, indeed what has been lacking from the very beginning (and what is translated into a notion of ‘loss’ in recent postcolonial critical works), is not an elaborate notion of the literary (i.e. as a critical fiction), but rather the literary as such; that is, the literary read ‘on its own terms’, rather than read as a response and correspondence to the commitments of a particular discipline. In this sense, melancholia suggests that the object of study – i.e. the literary (as the repressed) – has returned in an unrecognisable and uncomfortable way, exposing in a negative way the symptoms of institutionalisation, homogenisation, predictability, and dogmatism in much contemporary postcolonial criticism. The literary here becomes the uncanny otherness, as it emerges in relation to institutionalised practice, which may be seen as critically registering the dialectic of institutional power and excessive self-critique as a process of legitimising the loss of a margin, as I argued previously.

And it is precisely in *response* to this danger of the ‘return of the repressed’, i.e. the literary ‘on its own terms’, as a danger threatening the institutionalised authority of

postcolonial studies, that I want to situate this other dimension of melancholia (i.e. the attempt to translate lack into loss). It is a dimension which works in correspondence with the first dimension of melancholia (that is, as a symptom of the loss of criticality), one that *actively* or *manifestly* attempts to reclaim or reconstruct the dimension of the literary as it operated tacitly, as a critical fiction, within previous modes of postcolonial criticism. This other dimension of melancholia is one that is similar to Agamben's and Žižek's critiques of melancholia, suggesting that the mourning of the loss of the literary in a melancholic way is also a way of reclaiming a phantasmagorical notion of the literary for the purpose of legitimisation. Melancholic calls for renewed attention to the dimension of the literary can be seen as pre-emptive *responses* that play a vital role in what I see as a defensive strategy, a way of protecting the contemporary field of postcolonial studies from a mounting anxiety of being exposed or revealed as an impotent fiction; a way of warding off the suspicion that the field's insights, claims and evidences, as confirmed and demonstrated through the literary text, are merely phantasmagorical projections, and that its radicality or political commitments are 'spectacles' which in fact have allowed full participation in global capitalism.

To clarify, I am arguing that the emergence of melancholia is first of all to be seen as a symptom of the loss of criticality, which in part is due to the homogenised and institutionalised ways through which the literary has been treated; in another, and accompanying, sense, the emergence of melancholia must also be seen as a *pre-emptive* response to the danger that the literary poses, not in its constructed form but as the singular, unverifiable margin. That is to say, as a way of containing the danger of the uncanny otherness of the literary, as well as a way of *reclaiming* or *reconstructing* a

phantasmagorical notion of the literary that responds to the particular commitments and imperatives of the field. In this latter sense, postcolonial melancholia must at the same time, as I have argued, be understood as the *awareness* of the fact that the political radicality, as apparently promised by specific textual modalities, has not been confirmed and solidified, and that the fascination with subversive and experimental literary techniques has not only *not* avoided playing a role in the process of global commodification, but possibly played a vital part of the constitutive *causes* to this process.<sup>68</sup>

It is, however, at the same time important to stress that the *awareness* of this unredeemed political radicality precisely emerges in the ambiguous form of *melancholia*, that is, a form which can be read, indeed *must* be read, both as a symptom as well as a pre-emptive response – as two mutually complementary processes. Melancholia, as a pre-emptive strategy, mourning the *loss* of a politically radical identity, is at the same time a way of reclaiming or reconstructing it, which would also imply that the ‘loss’ here must be seen as a positivisation of an initial lack, an absence, which thus is repressed yet again – a deliberate misrecognition which represses the fact that what is melancholically positivised, reclaimed, recuperated, or reconstructed is at the same time the very cause of the loss in the first place; the loss of the literary and the loss of a critical framework through which the literary emerges.

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<sup>68</sup> Related to what I have referred to as postcolonial studies’ *prescriptive* ethos (what ‘ought’ to be, as distinct from what ‘is’), is the noticeable utopian rhetoric in works like the paradigmatic text *The Empire Writes Back*, as well as Homi Bhabha’s notion of ‘third space’, which, as Graham Huggan points out, has ‘become irritatingly prevalent in postcolonial theory, in part as a result of Bhabha’s consecration as a (or even *the*) postcolonial thinker’ (Huggan 2001, 268n). That postcolonial critics are increasingly becoming aware of the unfulfilled promises and potentials that earlier critical works – like *The Empire Writes Back* and Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* – outlined, is expressed in a recent roundtable discussion published in PLMA, where Jennifer Wenzel argues: ‘the world has changed, and changed in ways that bear directly on the concerns of the field ... Does the post-9/11 return to an expansionist, Manichean foreign policy imply a failure of postcolonial studies? I do feel a certain despair in this regard: our critiques have proved inadequate to obstruct or reroute the imperialist, racist logic of fighting over there to maintain power over here’ (Yaeger 2007, 634).



So far I have argued that contemporary postcolonial criticism at present undergoes a crisis, which can be observed through the field's ambiguous, melancholic relation to the dimension of the literary. This is not because notions of the literary as such are or have been absent, as some have suggested, but rather because the literary has been coerced into a highly institutionalised and codified set of norms (and increasingly so throughout the history of postcolonial studies), as a response to postcolonial studies' commitments and imperatives; the recent calls for a renewed focus on the dimension of the literary are in danger of reconstructing and repeating this highly codified notion of the literary, which, as I have argued, may be seen as one of the main causes of melancholia *in the first place*. Moreover, I have argued that it is important to clarify the underlying reasons as to why *realism* generally appears to be understood as an outmoded, irrelevant modality today; why it has become a 'scapegoat' or a 'straw man' within the discourse of what Gregory Ulmer has called 'post-criticism' – and *particularly* within the discipline of postcolonial studies. The need to criticise realism in postcolonial studies must be seen as the symptom of a larger, unresolved or repressed, issue, namely the anxiety about the legitimacy of the political radicality, underlying much of the dominant postcolonial vocabulary. The contemporary field of postcolonial studies suffers from melancholia which has ignited the desire for evermore pronounced calls for criticality, revealing an imminent fear that the field's canonised mantras may have been trapped within tautological impasses and phantasmagorical projections. The condition of melancholia can be seen as the effect of a complex process of legitimisation that is related to the narrow critical preference for specific textual modalities (e.g. inventive, experimental modalities read as resistant texts), as largely confirming, or corresponding to, the critical mantras of postcolonial studies.

What is needed, I am arguing, is to reformulate the basis for an expansion of the underlying aesthetic and political codifications operating in contemporary postcolonial studies, an issue that I will take up in the next chapter.

## Chapter Three

### Utopian-Interpretive Perspectives

#### Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed some of the melancholic premises on which much of the dominant postcolonial critical vocabulary has been based, and the way in which the literary has been used to legitimise an increasingly institutionalised critical identity. I criticised what I saw as the seamlessness between certain canonised forms of literary modalities and prescriptive formulas of postcolonial resistance, mutually confirming each other. However, my argument was *not* that one should ignore what have now become canonised postcolonial textual forms, and instead focus on marginalised modalities. Rather, what I have been alluding to so far is the possibility or potential of reading the figures of the literary – literariness as it emerges on both sides of the realist/anti-realist-constellation – *without* authoritatively having to refer to a dominant, prescriptive postcolonial vocabulary (which by implication means *without* recourse to what I have seen as the ideologically

coded configuration of a notion of the literary, operating in many postcolonial literary analyses).

All this leaves us, of course, with the task of proposing an alternative perspective, along the lines suggested above, which somehow avoids falling into the traps that I have examined so far. What I will be suggesting in the following is that to 'distance' the postcolonial literary text from its institutionalised reception may become a way of transferring authority *from* the postcolonial theoretical context *back* to the literary text itself; back to a notion of the literary text as fundamentally performing a singular, independent act of formal *interpretation*, both in an aesthetic as well as a political sense. And it is precisely here that I see a renewed potential of realism within postcolonial space, a potential that is not rigorously tied to a particular historical period,<sup>1</sup> but rather one that embodies a literary *ideal*, which manifests itself, at different levels within different textual modalities, as a *utopian-interpretive* trajectory.

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<sup>1</sup> My notion of realism will be informed by Georg Lukács's work. One of the advantages of Lukács's notion(s) of novelistic realism, as I see it, is that although it is based on novels written before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is not necessarily restricted to a particular (and bygone) *period* or a particular historical episteme (although this is obviously not to suggest that period has no significance at all in Lukács's notion of realism). Indeed, Lukács's appreciation of Balzac's realism as a modality that has not outplayed its role in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature is an interesting way of conceiving the ongoing critical potential of this form of representation. A notion of realism that is not tied rigorously to a particular period is especially relevant, I think, in the light of many literary scholars' dismissal of realism as being something that belongs entirely to pre-20<sup>th</sup> century literature, and which has long been replaced by more 'sophisticated' forms of representation. In the article 'Cognitive Mapping', Fredric Jameson has argued that one way of seeing realism as a form that exists alongside modernism and postmodernism is to focus on its *cognitive* dimension (i.e. what Jameson refers to as 'cognitive mapping'), which more concretely means to approach literary forms in the context of a 'higher' (cognitive) project (the mapping of totality), according to which various modalities respond in various ways. Albeit different from Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping, I think Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* should be seen more as a cognitive-epistemological theory of literature's potential than, say, merely a formalist or historical poetics of the novel. For other informative discussions of realism and period, see René Wellek's essay 'The Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship', Peter Demetz's 'Zur Definition des Realismus', and J.P. Stern's *On Realism*.

## Utopian Trajectories

To frame this utopian-interpretive dimension of the literary within a postcolonial context, I initially want to spend some time going through Nicholas Brown's arguments about postcolonial literariness in the book *The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (published in 2005). Brown focuses on the typical tendency to fetishise a postcolonial literary text's *content*, arguing that the tendency to treat postcolonial literature as 'raw material' for conclusions about socio-ethnographic aspects constitutes a blindness *which is ideologically coded*: 'it is not merely a blindness but a refusal of the properly eidaesthetic project of postcolonial literature, a refusal to recognize its appropriation of the problem of the absolute, understood explicitly ... as the social totality' (Brown 2005, 21).<sup>2</sup>

The notion of the 'eidaesthetic project' is one that Brown develops with reference to Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of German romanticism in the work *L'Absolu littéraire* from 1978.<sup>3</sup> In their view, the eidaesthetic constitutes the 'birth' of the literary in its modern sense. Brown specifies; the eidaesthetic project embodies a utopian or 'sublime' impulse which philosophically attempts to resolve 'antinomies whose

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<sup>2</sup> One of Brown's aims in *Utopian Generations* is to argue that 'Instead of merely acknowledging the author's subject position or, on the contrary, perpetually worrying about the reaction of some imagined hysterical other, we will try to demonstrate that a Marxist framework is not only not Eurocentric, but the only conceptual framework that potentially avoids the pitfalls of both Eurocentrism and of the paradoxically Eurocentric refusal of Eurocentrism' (Brown 2005, 5). 'Capital', Brown argues, 'determines the circulation of knowledge' (ibid.), and this circulation can only be grasped through the much-criticised concept of totality, in the Hegelian-Marxist sense: 'One of the objectives of this book is to restore the respectability of this Hegelian concept – indeed of the dialectic itself – to postcolonial studies' (7).

<sup>3</sup> Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe argue that the notion of the literary, in the modern sense, emerges in the age of romanticism, as a philosophical, 'eidaesthetic' vocation. The emergence of the literary signals, according to Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, the moment when criticality as such becomes a particular, and distinctly *theoretical*, discourse, embodied or expressed through the literary. Brown comments: 'Literature here emerges as the middle term in a temporal and logical series, sandwiched between two apparently extra-literary discourses as it *takes up* philosophy on one hand and *opens up* the space for theory on the other' (Brown 2005, 13), that is, when literature becomes, and deals explicitly or self-consciously with, a *theory* of literature.

origin lies outside philosophy', bearing the 'responsibility for overcoming contradictions produced by capitalism itself' (14).<sup>4</sup>

According to Brown, the literary, striving for the sublime, reaches a provisional culmination in modernist aesthetics, which also signals the first moment of *failure* – a moment when Georg Lukács is able to translate the (Kantian) antinomies of the modern world into distinctly Marxian terms. To overcome the antinomies of the modern world, Brown continues, 'requires the capacity to recognize that the sublime object is conceptually totalizable' (17). However, what is ultimately at stake in the modernist sublime, Brown argues (following, in part, Lukács), is an absolute reversal; aesthetic utopia within the modernist paradigm only becomes possible via an aestheticisation of the antinomies, which means that the 'totality to which modernism promises access is a mystification'. Hence, Brown writes, modernism becomes 'antagonistic to politics as such' (20).

Tracing this bifurcation of the aesthetic and the political, from romanticism to modernism, Brown goes on to suggest that postcolonial literature marks a 'third revolutionary moment' (ibid.), which is a literature 'in precisely the romantico-modern sense: postcolonial literature bears a specific ontological burden that differentiates it ... from other art forms in formerly colonized countries' (21).<sup>5</sup> If the postcolonial literary text

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<sup>4</sup> Brown refers to Kant's philosophical critique of aesthetic judgment which originally was meant to 'mediate between the "otherwise irreconcilable opposites" that characterize the Kantian impasse: the well-known antitheses of subject and object, phenomenon and noumenon, and the ever-widening circle of antinomies this fissure produces' (Brown 2005, 14). Here Brown qualifies the Kantian analysis with Lukács's notion of reification (as developed in the work *History and Class Consciousness*), in which the latter argued that these Kantian impasses are not merely to be seen as part of a philosophical discourse, but also reflect what Lukács calls the 'antinomies of bourgeois thought', that is, the reification of labour and the pervasive dominance of the commodity form.

<sup>5</sup> More specifically, this 'specific ontological burden' is in Brown's view literature's engagement with 'the problem of the absolute, understood explicitly now as the social totality' (Brown 2005, 21). However, since postcolonial literature too often is treated as 'raw material' by postcolonial criticism – or a 'repository of an ethnographic "cultural difference"' as Spivak has pointed out (Spivak 1999, 388) – Brown argues that this approach, which violently flattens the postcolonial aesthetic dimension, is not 'innocent' but on the contrary a deliberate refusal to engage with postcolonial literature's eidaesthetic project. 'It does not seem very useful',

continues the 'project of the eidaesthetic', as initiated in romanticism, Brown argues that what is fundamentally different in postcolonial literature 'is its refusal or evacuation of the whole problem, central to modernism, of the thing-in-itself: the evacuation, that is, of the whole structure of the sublime' (22). Postcolonial literature continues the eidaesthetic project, that is, continues to search for the (absent) totality of meaning, albeit from a fundamentally different position within the global order than modernism. However, this postcolonial utopian project, Brown observes, must not be seen as a positive ideal or vision, but on the contrary as a negative principle, as a lack, a contradiction within 'the actually existing social totality whose presence hints at an as yet unimaginable future' (ibid.), that is, a future which can be represented only as a lack within the global order. And although the utopian impulse eventually weakens and disappears in later stages of postcolonial literature,<sup>6</sup> it reappears, according to Brown, 'with the emergence of theory' (24). Brown's theoretical trajectory reaches its culmination with the identification of *Theory* as the 'true' contemporary inheritor of the eidaesthetic project (and in particular the 'self-conscious' version of *Theory*, namely postcolonial theory).

A reversal seems to have taken place here, from the romantic notion of the literary absolute to *Theory* in the age of postcoloniality; if the eidaesthetic attempt to recover the sublime has migrated to *Theory*, it also means that *Theory* itself becomes *dependent* on

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Brown continues, 'to describe the difference between modernism and the literature of decolonization in terms of some relative lack of interest in form or in some real representational immediacy, if this is understood as a kind of naïveté or obstinacy – however bracing or salutary' (Brown 2005, 21-22).

<sup>6</sup> Utopianist, anti-colonial literature was eventually replaced by a literature of disillusionment, which according to Brown was due to the fact that the conditions of the utopian element were often thoroughly mystified and dissembled from the very beginning (by national bourgeois classes). Here, the eidaesthetic project of the literary, as continued in postcolonial literature, seems to come to a dead end. At this point, however, Brown enlarges the framework by reminding us that postmodernism, the paradigmatic aesthetic discourse of the First World from the Sixties and onwards, itself is a phenomenon unthinkable without the decolonisation movement. To Brown, this also means that 'all theory is postcolonial theory: it owes its very existence to the struggle against colonial domination and its echo in the political urgency of the First World 1960s' (Brown 2005, 24).

literature as its 'self-conscious' other (similar to literature's dependence on theory) – insofar as it wants to avoid becoming 'a mere demand and ultimately an appeal to force' (28). This is, according to Brown, ultimately why we need to go back to literary texts.<sup>7</sup> That much postcolonial theory has *not* avoided the danger of becoming 'a mere demand and ultimately an appeal to force' is thus due to its reductive reading of postcolonial texts, as raw material or a repository of ethnographic cultural difference. Moreover, this failure is a symptom of the field's refusal to engage more specifically with the problem of the absolute or the social totality. And finally, this 'flattening' of the postcolonial text is also to blame for the lack of attention toward the eidaesthetic-utopian impulse, as it emerges in between the bifurcation of the interpretive hermeneutics of *Theory* and the literary text.

For all its original insights, Brown's theory nevertheless does not escape what I have seen as the haunting condition of melancholia in postcolonial studies, precisely because melancholia *also* includes the kind of 'pre-emptive response' which informs Brown's theoretical framework. What allows Brown's theoretical framework to appear as a legitimate attempt to construct a 'strategic map of the totality' (22) can be seen as his own discourse's ideologically coded desire for the *separation* from the literary. If Brown too readily accepts the failure of the postcolonial text, and its utopian-political possibilities, he also melancholically mourns its 'absence', in a way that generates critical and ideological

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<sup>7</sup> Attempting to recuperate the eidaesthetic-utopian impulse or the postromantic absolute, Brown advocates for the dimension of the 'anagogic' in the allegorical tradition, as the proper hermeneutical horizon (following in part Jameson's notion of allegory; see Jameson's explication of the medieval four-fold interpretive system, in *The Political Unconscious*, 16). To Brown, the biblical anagogic meaning (as well as the dimension of totality itself) is 'a "nodal point" that binds the signifier to the signified for the subject caught up in the signifying machine' (Brown 2005, 26); as a hermeneutic horizon, it constitutes a utopian point, in the negative sense, that is, as a lack, a contradiction within an existing social totality, hinting toward an as yet unimaginable future of unconditioned libidinal freedom – the end of history. The anagogic and the postromantic absolute, Brown argues, 'are the ultimate resting points of all signification within their respective systems, the absent signifieds that guarantee the meaning of a signifier that it itself would be merely fragmentary and infinitely interpretable' (ibid.).



legitimacy to postcolonial theory as *the* inheritor and legislator of the eidaesthetic project. That is to say, if Brown's theoretical perspective recuperates the eidaesthetic project, as a way of restoring a critical, postcolonial margin, it also mourns the lack of it *in* postcolonial literature – a melancholic process which, as I argued earlier, precisely can be seen as the cause of melancholia in postcolonial studies *in the first place*.

Postcolonial melancholia, I argued, must be understood as both the symptom of the loss of an actual dimension of the literary in postcolonial studies, while at the same time constituting the field's pre-emptive response, which prevents the emergence of this symptom from posing a critical threat, and which furthermore allows postcolonial theory to *reclaim* a (re)constructed notion of the literary (a reconstruction which involves the translation of lack into a notion of loss), as a legitimising device.

### **The Secret of the Form**

Nicholas Brown's theoretical outline of the eidaesthetic project provides us with a set of issues through which we may recuperate a utopian-interpretive dimension of the postcolonial literary text, *as* a literary text, while also tracing, directly and indirectly, the problems this recuperation may raise in terms of specific disciplinary, hermeneutic concerns. In the following I want to explore this line of inquiry further, but with a specific focus on the 'workings' of *form*. This exploration should be seen as a preparation for the argument that I will pursue in more concrete details afterwards – that we need to distance the postcolonial literary text from its institutionalised reception, precisely in order to transfer authority back to the literary text itself.

To clarify this process, we may turn to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, in which Slavoj Žižek links Marx's analysis of the commodity form, as a symptom of the fetishisation of the social-human relations in capitalist society, with Freud's notion of the symptom in the dream analysis. At a basic level, Žižek argues, 'there is a fundamental homology between the interpretative procedure of Marx and Freud – more precisely between their analysis of commodity and of dreams' (Žižek 1992, 11). Freud and Marx both develop *interpretative strategies*, which attempt to avoid the 'fetishistic fascination of the "content" supposedly hidden behind the form' (ibid.); what must be revealed or unveiled through analysis is not some kernel of the content which is hidden by the form, whether this form is embodied in the dream or the commodity, but rather the secret of the form *as such*. Dream-interpretation, for example, as Freud points out, is not about revealing some latent, 'hidden kernel' of the manifest content, but rather about investigating the process by which latent dream-thoughts have assumed a particular form, that is, *why* they were 'transposed into the form of a dream' (ibid.) in the first place. Insofar as we try to unveil the 'secret of the dream' *behind* the manifest text, Žižek argues, we are bound to be disappointed, because 'all we find is some entirely "normal" – albeit usually unpleasant – thought ... definitely not "unconscious"' (12).<sup>8</sup> What is still not explained is according to

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<sup>8</sup> More specifically, what Žižek refers to as the 'normal' thought is the untranslatable, unconscious desire (Freud's Ur-repression) which is repressed from the very beginning, with 'no "original" in the "normal" language of everyday communication ... its only place is in the mechanisms of the "primary process"' (Žižek 1992, 13). This explains why we cannot 'reduce the interpretation of dreams, or symptoms in general, to the retranslation of the "latent dream-thought" into the "normal", everyday common language of inter-subjective communication' (ibid.). Žižek identifies three distinct elements at work here: 'the *manifest dream-text*, the *latent dream-content* or thought and the *unconscious desire* articulated in a dream' (ibid.). The unconscious desire is not more secret than the latent thought; quite the contrary, it consists 'entirely of the signifier's mechanisms ... its only place is in the *form* of the "dream": the real subject matter of the dream (the unconscious desire) articulates itself in the dream-work, in the elaboration of its "latent content"' (ibid.). Thus, the basic paradox is that the unconscious desire, apparently containing the hidden kernel, 'articulates itself precisely through the dissimulation work of the "kernel" of a dream, its latent thought, through the work of disguising this content-kernel by means of its translation into the dream-rebus' (ibid.). It follows that Freud's approach implies two steps; first, we must break down the appearance of the dream's meaninglessness, in

Zizek 'simply its form, the process by means of which the hidden meaning disguised itself in such a form' (15).

With commodities, Zizek argues, the same issue is ultimately at stake; it is not a question of finding some assumed hidden kernel of the commodity – e.g. its value as determined by the work spent in the production – 'but to explain why work assumed the form of the value of a commodity, why it can affirm its social character only in the commodity-form of its product' (11). In the Marxian analysis of the commodity, one must remove its *Schein* or appearance, 'according to which the value of a commodity depends on pure hazard' (14). That is to say, one must attempt to grasp the dynamic *implicit* in the commodity-form as such. Having discovered that the meaning or value of the commodity is not determined accidentally or hazardously, Marx argues that it is not enough to attempt *unmasking* its secret, because this would suggest that the secret of the commodity is something that is 'concealed', and which can be 'uncovered' by the right methods; the *real* secret is '*the secret of this form itself*' (15). This is why the commodity form remains enigmatic; we are fascinated by the secret, believing it to be something hidden 'beneath' the content, while overlooking the work of the form itself. Zizek's readings of Freud's dream interpretation and Marx's commodity analysis point at the pivotal notion of a hermeneutical principle oriented toward the workings of the form itself; an inherent interpretive mechanism at work *at the level of form*, which the hermeneutical practice must recuperate or re-translate.

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order to create some kind of message or meaning. This is fundamentally a hermeneutical or interpretative act. Secondly, we must eradicate our fascination with this 'message', the content hidden in the manifest dream-text; instead we must focus on the form itself – the 'dream-work to which the "latent dream-thoughts" were submitted' (14).

## Literary Form as Interpretation

Since what must be recuperated or re-translated is always-already the balancing process of reflexivity (theory) and representativity (poetry) – to follow Nancy's and Lacoue-Labarthe's notion of the literary absolute – the workings of criticism constitute a particularly dangerous and unstable process (as Brown's outline demonstrates, directly and indirectly). To recuperate the balance of the workings of the form in the literary text (or the form of the dream/commodity), it is vital to avoid the dangers of *displacing* this balance, whereby the dimension of reflexivity becomes correlated with principles located *outside* that of the literary form itself, thus rendering the dimension of literariness as one being primarily of representativity.

The institutionalisation of postcolonial studies, the atmosphere of melancholia, and the loss of the literary, are all issues, I would argue, intimately related to this problematic; that is to say, the 'success' of postcolonial literary criticism is to some extent achieved at the expense of a *displacement* of the balance between reflexivity and representativity, vital to a hermeneutical practice that is able to recuperate the utopian potential of the literary, as an interpretive activity at work *at the level of form*.

What I want to explore in the following is another framework which may guide us toward the utopian potential of the literary, one that attempts to steer clear of the dangers such as those I outlined hitherto. More concretely, I am proposing a return to the eidaesthetic project of the literary as interpreted in Georg Lukács's oeuvre, or perhaps rather as *travelling* in Lukács's oeuvre.<sup>9</sup> In the following, I will focus on Lukács's early

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<sup>9</sup> In the essay 'Travelling Theory' from 1982, Edward Said proposed the idea that the first time a cultural dynamic or phenomenon is filtered through a theoretical formulation, this formulation's strength derives directly from the source of a concrete, historical context. Focusing on Georg Lukács's theory of reification, as developed in *History and Class Consciousness* (published in 1923), Said's argument was that in later

work *Theory of the Novel*, which was first published in book-form in 1920, and subsequently move on to the later Lukács's Marxist-realist theory, in order to trace what I see as both a contradictory and to some extent obvious, development of a formal-representational dynamic, which I want to activate in, or connect with, the context of postcoloniality.

The main reason for this return to Lukács is first of all to recuperate a notion of a literary utopian-interpretive dimension at work at the level of *form*. Secondly, this return should furthermore indicate ways in which we may conceive a potential of literary *realism*, as a modality that maintains a formal balance between reflexivity and representativity, while preventing either of those two dimensions in becoming an autonomous discourse.<sup>10</sup> And thirdly, Lukács's development toward an increasingly dogmatic and institutionalised notion of a realist ideal (the Balzacian 19<sup>th</sup> century novel form as the exemplary mode of literature) exposes, in a negative sense, how the potential of the literary (seen as an independent hermeneutical practice) may become distilled into a set of prescriptive, extra-literary *norms*, even if these norms closely resemble the formal work of the literary text; while one may sympathise with many of the underlying reasons for the later Lukács's

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formulations of this concept by Lucien Goldmann and Raymond Williams, the original force, emanating from the social upheavals in early twentieth-century Budapest, had been gradually domesticated, tamed and institutionalised. Subsequently, Said revised his concept of travelling theory in order to re-emphasise and re-actualise what he saw as the revolutionary potential in Lukács's concept. What Said, in the essay 'Travelling Theory Reconsidered' from 1994, identifies as the element which gradually domesticates and thus 'reifies' the original strength of Lukács's concept of reification, is not so much an effect of its subsequent and geographically dispersed formulations by followers of Lukács, but as something *already implicit* in the original formulation by Lukács himself, namely the notion of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history (which Lukács subsequently rejected later in his career).

<sup>10</sup> One may argue that such a notion of realism is problematic in contemporary postcolonial studies because it does not seem to allow space for the development of an independent discourse of reflexivity (such as postcolonial *theory*) – at least not to the same extent as for example modalities belonging to the modernist ethos; the latter kinds of texts seem to call for the *need* of an independent discourse of interpretation.

rigorous conception of realism,<sup>11</sup> the problem here is precisely that the *balancing act*, as that which endows the literary text with its utopian potential, has been broken.<sup>12</sup> What is valued in this displaced process is precisely *not* the potential of the utopian dimension as generated by the figures of the literary, but rather the adaptation of the latter into a static and dogmatic, extra-literary framework, which is in need of accreditation (that the literary text may ‘guarantee’) in order to achieve its own legitimate balance – a balancing act that becomes petrified and static, that is, a *lost* balance; in comparison, I would argue, the atmosphere of melancholia in the field of contemporary postcolonial studies can in this sense be seen as the sign of a loss of an actual balancing act.

### **Lukács’s Theory of the Novel I: *The Theory of the Novel***

The opening chapter of *Theory of the Novel* is characterised by a strikingly extravagant mixture of pathos and lyricism, nostalgically evoking a golden image of an a-historical, epic past age, which in a crude way is contrasted to a disenchanted and rationalised modernity, whose essence and meaning are absent and which can only be mapped through the ironic comparison with an idealised lost age. Lukács’s fallen world of modernity embodies the age of ‘transcendental homelessness’ (Lukács 2003, 41) in which the first historically significant genre appears in the form of the novel, carrying out the paradoxical task of representing an *unrepresentable* world.

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<sup>11</sup> For example Lukács’s attempt to translate an abstract utopian ideal into a concrete, political programme. Likewise, one may equally sympathise with many of the claims underlying what has become a dominant postcolonial vocabulary in contemporary discourse, yet the problematic of dogmatism and institutionalisation nonetheless remain.

<sup>12</sup> And insofar as this balance is broken, one could argue that the consequence is a development toward an institutionalised and dogmatic perspective, however sympathetic or justified this perspective might initially have appeared.

The main difference between the epic and the novel is, according to Lukács, *history*. The novel becomes ‘the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality’ (56). As the paradigmatic genre of modernity, the novel strives for an epic, rounded and truthful totality, which however can ‘be systematised only in abstract terms’ (70). The novel form, Lukács claims, constructs an abstract ‘postulate’, namely the idealistic possibility of reconciliation or resolution of the subject-object antinomy – the conflict between the ‘problematic individual’ and the ‘contingent world’ (78).<sup>13</sup> But this abstract postulate is a pseudo-solution, a short-circuit with no epistemological truth-value, because far from reconciling the subject and the object, it separates them even further.<sup>14</sup> The unrepresentability of the age of modernity – or what Lukács calls the ‘fragility of the world’ – can be regulated through certain abstract or formal laws, but it cannot be eliminated as such; rather, ‘this fragility will appear in the novel as unprocessed raw material’ (72), which also means that the regulative laws or structures of the novel remain wholly abstract and inorganic.

This is the melancholic dynamic of the novel; an epic intention that remains abstract or reified. As a whole, the novel accentuates the *gap* or *distance* separating its abstract, inner form (the regulative laws of the novelistic medium which is empty or insubstantial) from its concrete content, or what Lukács refers to as the ‘outward form’ or the ‘problematic subjectivity’, i.e. the biographical life of an individual in search of his or her

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<sup>13</sup> For an account of Lukács’s inspiration from Hegel and Kant, see Bernstein’s *The Philosophy of the Novel*.

<sup>14</sup> Lukács writes that there are two primary dangers of the novel’s aesthetic strategy: ‘either the fragility of the world may manifest itself so crudely that it will cancel out the immanence of meaning which the form demands, or else the longing for the dissonance to be resolved, affirmed and absorbed into the work may be so great that it will lead to a premature closing of the circle of the novel’s world, causing the form to disintegrate into disparate, heterogeneous parts’ (Lukács 2003, 71-72).

‘inner essence’.<sup>15</sup> Far from finding an answer to this search (which would mean reconciliation), the subject is instead left to confront the *impossibility* of finding a truthful answer to his or her quest. That is to say, the concrete, narrative embodiment of the abstract postulate (the resolution of the subject-object antinomy) – as the biographical project of the protagonist (in search of meaning) – at the same time implies the withdrawal of any reconciling intentions.<sup>16</sup>

And yet, Lukács argues that the very form-giving ethos of the novel, its formulation of regulative laws and structures, is also what ultimately constitutes the possibility of constructing an aesthetically truthful response to modernity in the first place. The novel’s abstractness, that is, its epic intentions, becomes a *form* ‘as a result of the abstraction seeing through itself; the immanence of meaning required by the form is attained precisely when the author goes all the way, ruthlessly, towards exposing its absence’ (72). Emerging as an aesthetic response to an historical paradigm in which a natural-organic totality can no

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<sup>15</sup> The human life as the narrative perspective of the novel is according to Lukács necessary in order to give the form an inner coherence, which however remains inauthentic and constructed. It is however important to stress that Lukács does not see the novel as being strictly a *biographical* form, but rather that it employs the biographical form as a centralising perspective. As Lukács later will argue in *The Historical Novel* (published in 1937), one of the reasons why Thomas Mann, for example, is unable to reach the same historical depth as Walter Scott is precisely because of his use of the biographical form; here, the individual perspective is still seen as centralising, but in a negative sense, as something that bars the access to a trans-individual insight.

<sup>16</sup> Through the search for meaning, the novelistic subject challenges, according to Lukács, the world’s ‘bad infinity’ (which in *The Theory* is another word for ‘modernity’ as such). Lukács uses this concept in Hegel’s sense, as the latter developed it in the three-volume work *Science of Logic* (published between 1812-1816). Hegel here distinguishes between two forms of infinity – ‘bad infinity’ and ‘true infinity’. The latter kind constitutes a reconciliation of the finite and the infinite in that it consists of a series of finites, but only in so far as these constitute a whole, which precedes the particulars, and thus frames them by which it becomes an infinity; as an organising principle it is infinite in the sense that it always designates more than the parts as such. According to Frederick Beiser, ‘Hegel thinks that there is only one thing that could satisfy this requirement: the universe as a whole; for anything less than the whole is still conceivable only against what it is not, only against that which is not contained within itself. There are two senses of the *bad* infinite: that which is beyond the finite or the negation of the finite; and an infinite series that never ends. The first sense is bad because the infinite is still affected by negation, the finite outside itself; the second sense is bad because it is not a complete or self-sufficient whole’ (Beiser 2006, 319).



longer be grasped,<sup>17</sup> the novel form is confronted with the fragility of a world *in need of interpretation* (in order to be grasped as meaningful). To avoid becoming fundamentally inauthentic (i.e. a wrong and untrue interpretation or abstraction), the novel's form-giving ethos must in turn be 'objectified', or, formulated differently, confronted with the impossibility of achieving its goal (which is to render the world truthfully through its regulative laws) – a confrontation which Lukács designates as the 'abstraction seeing through itself' that reveals the absence of an absolute truth in its regulative, aesthetic laws. The novel form, in other words, must represent events that belong to a causal-determining order to which we can have no access, while at the same time show that this task – or 'ethic', as Lukács calls it – is fundamentally an interpretive-reflexive act without proper legitimacy or transcendent authority. While other aesthetic genres, Lukács argues (referring to historical genres preceding the novel), are predetermined *formally*, since 'a balance between the constituent elements' (ibid.) of their formal laws is already settled in advance (by strict generic rules), the novel form is precisely an ethic of *form-giving*. Lukács calls this form-giving a 'fluctuating yet firm balance between becoming and being' (73). In other words, the novel form is not a grid or a predefined schematic, but an active *process*, a 'working-through'.<sup>18</sup> This is also why Lukács refers to the novel as the most 'hazardous

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<sup>17</sup> The first part of *Theory of the Novel* orchestrates a grandiose, melancholic mourning of the loss of totality (or of the Greek harmony) in the age of modernity, a loss which is used strategically to measure, negatively, the episteme from which the novel, as a historically 'adequate' genre, emerges as an aesthetic response (that is, similar to Fredric Jameson's Althusserian notion of history or totality as a 'lack' or an 'absent cause'; see Jameson's *Marxism and Form* for a reading of Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*, 160-205; see also *The Political Unconscious* where Jameson reads the Lukácsian conception of totality in terms of the Althusserian notion of History as an 'absent cause', 39). Lukács's notion of totality in *Theory of the Novel* implies a world which is in need of no interpretation because each part coheres perfectly and meaningfully with all others, like in the (phantasmagorically imagined) Greek world. See also Susan Derwin's *The Ambivalence of Form* for a reading of Lukács's strategic use of 'Greece' as a counter-image to modernity.

<sup>18</sup> Or as Jameson, in his reading of *Theory of the Novel*, evocatively writes: 'a hybrid form which must be reinvented at every moment of its development. Each novel is a process in which the very possibility of narration must begin in a void, without any acquired momentum: its privileged subject matter will therefore be the search, in a world in which neither goals nor paths are established beforehand' (Jameson 1971, 172).

genre', and 'only half an art' (ibid.). As a process, this does not mean that the novel's ethic of form-giving must be foregrounded at the level of content, but on the contrary that it must remain as the 'regulative, hidden nature of the effective binding and forming ideas' (ibid.). The ethic of form-giving must remain 'indefinable and unformulable' (74), as Lukács puts it, in order to become 'objectified' or 'corrected' by its content, thus achieving what Lukács sees as the ultimate goal of the novel – the 'equilibrium' of formal laws and the representation of life. In other words, the more *unformulable* and *indefinable* these laws are constructed, the more easily they can become harmonised and integrated in an 'organic' way (albeit only in a conceptual sense, not in a *truly* organic way) with the outer form, the content.

It is against this background that Lukács in the first part of *The Theory* can claim that the overall formal principle of the novel, which ties the abstract and the concrete together into one perspective without becoming reconciled, is irony. Irony, Lukács writes,

is the self-correction of the world's fragility: inadequate relations can transform themselves into a fanciful yet well-ordered round of misunderstandings and cross-purposes, within which everything is seen as many-sided, within which things appear as isolated and yet connected, as full of value and yet totally devoid of it, as abstract fragments and as concrete autonomous life, as flowering and as decaying, as the infliction of suffering and as suffering itself. (75)

The totalising intentions of the novel shape an inner form that postulates an abstract ideal of subject-object reconciliation (or the overcoming of the radical split between the formal laws of the novel and its content), which is concretised through the narrative of a problematic subjectivity that ironically undermines this abstract ideal. Through this constellation or dynamic, Lukács claims that an 'objectivity' or 'self-correction' is achieved, since it reveals, measures or foregrounds, in a negative or ironic sense, the difference between meaning and life.

‘Art’, Lukács writes, is demonic in the sense that it ‘says “And yet!” to life. The creation of forms is the most profound confirmation of the existence of a dissonance’ (72).<sup>19</sup> The demonic revolt (or the radical freedom in a world without any transcendental, divine authorities – the aesthetic-ironic ‘And Yet’ which Lukács identifies as the ‘centre’ of the novel form) is at a fundamental level a revolt against the loss of meaning, the reification of reality, or the gap between life and meaning emerging as a consequence of the loss of a sense of totality.<sup>20</sup> The radical, anarchic force of irony, as the highest form of freedom in a godless world, generates a new life, or infinity (albeit in a purely conceptual, non-organic sense), between the relatively independent ‘parts and their attachment to the whole’ (75), which must be ‘abolished again and again’ (76).

Lukács, however, is aware of the radical danger of irony, its spiralling and unstoppable reflective force that threatens even the relatively modest claims of the formal intentions of the novel. Novelistic irony, according to Lukács, operates in two inter-related ways; one operates at the level of the form (as we have seen above), and the other occurs in connection with what Lukács calls the ‘creative subjectivity’, existing *above* the form (or *outside* the form, a meta-formal awareness), and which Lukács also refers to as ‘the ultimate unifying principle’ (84). This principle, as it is conceived in the first part of *The Theory*, is not quite as solid and unifying as it may suggest, but rather designates a different

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<sup>19</sup> This Hegelian notion of form – as being the resolution of social contradictions or dissonances of existence – reappears in Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* where it is said that ‘the aesthetic act is ... ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal “solutions” to unresolvable social contradictions’ (Jameson 2002a, 64). In *The Theory*, the aesthetic project of form-giving could be seen as designating what Jameson refers to as ‘ideology’, although I think it would be more correct to see it as a form of novelistic interpretation.

<sup>20</sup> In Lukács’s view, ‘The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God’ (Lukács 2003, 88). ‘Fallen gods’, he writes, ‘become demons; their power is effective and alive, but it no longer penetrates the world, or does not yet do so: the world has a coherence of meaning, a causality, which is incomprehensible to the vital, effective force of a god-become-demon; from the demon’s viewpoint, the affairs of such a world appear purely senseless’ (86-87).

kind of irony or threatening negativity, namely the self-consciousness of fictitiousness itself – the power of imagining and representing an alternative or fictive world that at a certain level stands in a contrasting or negative relationship to the outside world.

What is ultimately at stake in connection with the ironic force of the ‘creative subjectivity’ is the question of truthfulness of the novelistic discourse, the gap between idea and reality. Lukács argues that this kind of irony generates a melancholic ‘need for reflexion’ (85) within the very act of form-giving itself. One could also see this ‘need for reflexion’ as similar to what Edward Said has seen as the ever-present danger within the discourse of the fiction, ‘of how the novel is always subject to a comparison with reality and thereby found to be illusion’ (Said 1975, 84). The ‘need for reflexion’ is, according to Lukács, the novel’s ‘deepest melancholy’ (Lukács 2003, 85) because it signals an awareness of the loss of any possibilities of creating a natural-organic totality – hence the need for interpretation or reflexion (which, as Lukács notes, is profoundly inartistic). The need for reflexion is in other words the self-reflective and disenchanting awareness of the novel’s inability to overcome the conventionality of its laws, the inadequacies of its illusionary techniques – an unstable, meta-fictive awareness which threatens even the ‘negative truth’ as produced by the first kind of irony (operating at the level of form). As such, the need for reflexion is a ‘balancing device’ in the sense that it

makes form-giving possible and it rounds off the form, but the very manner in which it does so points eloquently at the sacrifice that has had to be made, at the paradise lost forever, sought and never found. This vain search and then the resignation with which it is abandoned make the circle that completes the form. (85)

The more the novel’s epic project attempts to manifest itself as ‘normative’, the more it must prescribe still stricter aesthetic laws for itself; yet at the same time, this dynamic also implies that the ‘need for reflexion’ becomes ever more urgent, because the ‘creative

subjectivity', or the 'unifying principle', increasingly becomes aware of the difference between its abstract postulate, its idea, and then the outward reality.

In the second part of *The Theory*, Lukács introduces what seems to be a new element that somewhat disturbs the argument about irony which he presented in the first part, namely temporality.<sup>21</sup> Temporality (or *durée* in the Bergsonian sense) is an ambiguous concept in *The Theory*, since at first sight it seems to intertwine with the forces of irony, but later becomes *affirmative* – a 'positive' justification of the demonic revolt. In the struggle against the widening gap between idea and reality, Lukács claims, the novel produces 'experiences of time which are authentically epic because they give rise to action and stem from action: the experiences of hope and memory' (124).

Why does Lukács, at this late stage in his theory, introduce the reconciliatory and affirmative concept of temporality, and how does it relate to his previous argument which emphasised the almost diametrically opposite? Whereas Paul De Man praises Lukács for having eliminated organicism via irony in the first part of *The Theory*, he disappointedly remarks that it 'has reentered the picture in the guise of time' in the work's second part: 'Time in this essay acts as a substitute for the organic continuity which Lukács seems unable to do without' (De Man 1983, 58). It is however questionable whether Lukács in the first part understands irony to eliminate the organic *as such*, that is, as its primary goal; or whether perhaps Lukács rather implies that the two ironic forces, operating at different levels in the novel, together constitute an opening toward the possibility of experiencing a

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<sup>21</sup> In the second part of *The Theory*, Lukács develops an outline of a 'typology' of various novelistic genres balancing the subject-object problematic in different ways (i.e. the problematic subject's relation to reality). His introduction of temporality occurs during his discussion of the novel of romantic disillusionment, although I would argue that it also correlates more generally with his overall theory of the novel form, as developed in the first part of *The Theory*. The finer details of Lukács's, somewhat eclectic, typology will not be pursued further here. See instead Eva Corredor's *György Lukács and the Literary Pretext* and J.M. Bernstein's *The Philosophy of the Novel*.

form of immediacy (albeit not in a truly organic way). In this sense, the novel form constitutes a discontinuous, compositional form whose epistemologically illegitimate insights (in an age of transcendental homelessness) are objectified or balanced by the constant dangers of excessive irony, and spiralling, out-of-control meta-reflections, exposing the fictitiousness, the inorganicity, and the unnaturalness of its claims.

In contrast to the epic, Lukács argues, the relatively independent parts of the novel 'must have a strict compositional and architectural significance' (Lukács 2003, 76);<sup>22</sup> no part is justified by its mere presence, but must play its part in a highly regulated and prescriptive structure, in order to become a totality. And yet still, this prescriptive architectonic structure remains abstract and wholly ironic.<sup>23</sup> This is where Lukács inserts time as a formal device which brings to life the abstract and ironic totality of the novel, turning it into 'a concrete and organic continuum' (125), a continuum that integrates the actions and meaning of human lives within a historico-social context. As a linear and continuous force, generating the experience of anticipation and retrospection within the novel's composed order, the formal incorporation of time eventually dissolves and smoothes out the cracks, accidents, dissonances and tensions produced by irony, uniting the

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<sup>22</sup> Since the novel is only a 'half-art', Lukács argues, it must prescribe 'still stricter, still more inviolable artistic laws for itself' (Lukács 2003, 73) than other art forms, and 'these laws are the more binding, the more indefinable and unformulable' (74). It is only through the employment of these laws that the novel's ethical complexes can maintain 'equilibrium', balance or self-correction.

<sup>23</sup> Which is also another way of saying that if the author stresses the 'discrete autonomous life' of each part, this will lead to artificiality, 'excessive obviousness of composition' (Lukács 2003, 76), something which Lukács later criticised naturalism and modernism for; to show that the parts are contingent is merely to shed 'light upon a state of affairs which is necessarily present at all times and everywhere' (77). On the other hand, this does not mean that the novel 'naturalises', because while the novel form may strive for an organic-natural connectivity between the parts (i.e. dissolve their discrete autonomous lives into an organic and meaningful totality), this can only happen at a purely conceptual level (because of irony). Yet, the important thing is neither the 'naturalising' part, nor the ironic 'tearing apart', but precisely the twofold process of creating a conceptual totality, which is 'revealed again and again as illusory' (ibid.). Precisely in that very gesture, a new (albeit negative) recognition can be achieved, 'a mere glimpse of meaning' (80) – the rendering of the fragility of the world, and the abstract interpretation of it, the latter of which simultaneously is being undermined through the represented.

novel's rudimentary and irruptive form in an organic way: it 'rubs the sharp edges off each heterogeneous fragment and establishes a relationship – albeit an irrational and inexpressible one – between them' (ibid.).<sup>24</sup>

If the novel form, in contrast to the epic, must 'have a strict compositional and architectural significance' in order to become a signifying totality, and if time is to be seen as that formal device which eventually dissolves the 'abstractness' of the novel's strict compositionality, how may we understand this process in more concrete hermeneutical terms? Here we may specify further what Lukács's ideas of compositionality and time imply, at least at one level, via the concept of 'narrative causality'.<sup>25</sup> The concept of narrative causality has been widely criticised in contemporary criticism, not least by poststructuralists who have argued that the cause-effect constellation is basically an illusion which can always be reversed.<sup>26</sup> In the article 'Causality and Narrative', Jon-K. Adams argues that what prevents us from recognising 'causality as an underlying principle of narrative is the general attitude that replaces the experience of events with the descriptions

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<sup>24</sup> Lukács's theory of the narrative dynamic of the novel form can be seen as similar to the one Peter Brooks outlines in his appropriation of the Freudian figure of 'Nachträglichkeit' in *Reading for the Plot*; the master trope of narrative, Brooks argues, is the '*anticipation of retrospection*' (Brooks 1984, 23), the expectation of a narrative end that 'can finally determine meaning, close the sentence as a signifying totality' (22). According to Lukács, the novel 'comprises the essence of its totality between the beginning and the end' (Lukács 2003, 83), in between which life is 'the thread upon which the whole world of the novel is strung and along which it unrolls, but ... this development acquires significance only because it is typical of that system of ideas and experienced ideals which regulatively determines the inner and outer world of the novel' (82). Similarly, Paul Ricoeur's notion of narrative and temporality (which informs Peter Brooks' theory of 'plot') is one that can be seen as similar to Lukács's narrative dynamic: 'A story is *made out* of events to the extent that plot *makes* events *into* a story. The plot, therefore, places us at the crossing point of temporality and narrativity' (Ricoeur 1981, 167).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Jameson's argument, compatible with *The Theory*, that the principle of causality becomes necessary in a world without the possibility of appealing to magical or transcendental forces (in the essay 'Beyond the Cave'; 128-129).

<sup>26</sup> What deconstructionists, Jon-K. Adams argues, typically grapple with when they argue for the possibility of reversing cause and effect, is not cause and effect as such, 'but simply a reversal of the order in which the events enter consciousness, that is, the order in which they are identified ... one event can be identified as an effect long before its corresponding cause is identified ... but this does not alter the order of cause and effect; it merely indicates the order of identification' (Adams 1989, 155). Within postcolonial studies, one could raise a similar argument, I believe, against the widely used notion of 'writing back to the centre' (the centre as being the cause, and the margin as being the effect).

of them' (Adams 1989, 150). Causality as such is not part of our experience, Adams argues: we do not experience a 'cause' as such, but only *infer* an experienced event to be the cause of another event, an event which then becomes the effect of that particular event-inferred-to-be-a-cause. To describe an event as a 'cause' – to infer that an event is the determining cause of another event – is to interpret it as such. This also means that to identify the experienced event as the cause itself is a 'representational fallacy'.<sup>27</sup> This is not to say that experience has nothing to do with causality, quite the contrary; to experience something, Adams argues (following Kant), is at the same time to assume some general law of causality. But this assumption need not necessarily be true *per se*, that is, we may believe that a particular event is a cause causing another event, but that belief may turn out to be unfounded; yet, the point is that without such an assumption we would not be able to believe in the first place.<sup>28</sup> If causality is a concept which only emerges discursively, narrative causality cannot be mere reflections or imitations of the world, but rather 'an understanding or explanation of that world' (151).<sup>29</sup>

But how does causality more concretely function in narrative? Narrative, Adams argues, 'is retrodictive. Rather than predicting what will occur under certain conditions, narrative describes what has occurred under certain conditions and, in so doing, provides a causal explanation by establishing those conditions and the events that are bound to them'

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<sup>27</sup> Adams refers to Hume's famous argument that 'causality is a concept derived from experience, in which we observe that one type of event always seems to precede another certain type, so that later, when we observe again one of the former types, we then infer that the latter type will occur' (Adams 1989, 151).

<sup>28</sup> Kant's famous critique of Hume, Adams argues, is in fact not so much a dismissal (of Hume's argument) as a supplement: 'Kant claims that there are empirical reasons for accepting the general law of causality ... we assume the general principle of causality in the way we experience events, without at the same time being able to or even needing to determine a priori the specific nature of the causal relation or the specific causes and effects involved' (Adams 1989, 152-153).

<sup>29</sup> Here one could also refer back to Marx's commodity analysis; it is precisely because we experience the economic metabolism as 'objective' that we infer relations to be causally determined, an act which nonetheless is already an objectified form of interpretation emerging only within a specific, discursive system.



(152). That is to say, narrative posits a finite or strict compositional structure (whether linear, circular or fragmented etc.) which *in advance* has interpreted or inferred a particular causal-determining relationship between events, without thereby identifying any causes or effects *as such*, that is, in an absolute and truthful way.

This notion of narrative causality can be seen as similar to what Lukács is referring to when he outlines the ‘strict, compositional and architectural significance’ of the narrative framework or novelistic totality. Lukács’s notion of a novelistic totality remains abstract and ironic precisely because its narrative structure (of events interpreted to be causally related) *cannot* guarantee any truthfulness as such, and which thus instead generates a ‘negative truth’, as well as, more worryingly, a ‘need for reflexion’ (that is, the negative, ironic awareness of the novel form’s failure or ‘the deepest melancholy of every great and genuine novel’). Yet, as we have seen, this only constitutes the first step in Lukács’s theory. If the ‘narrator links past events together to form a narrative by making inferences based on the assumption that the events are related by some principle, a principle that we tend to call the law of causality’ (Adams 1989, 153), and which, in Lukács’s sense, basically means the construction of a ‘strict, compositional and architectural significance’, the principle of *time* must be seen as the narrative structure’s own, counter-ironic, or ‘organic’ response to irony. The principle of time thus generates a *correction* of the ironic self-correction of the narrative’s structure of selected events (interpreted or inferred to be causally related), a negation of the negation, which, albeit being of an equally ironic nature, is precisely an irony directed toward the ironic force itself:

Time brings order into the chaos of men’s lives and gives it the semblance of a spontaneously flowering, organic entity; characters having no apparent meaning appear, establish relations with one another, break them off, disappear again without any meaning having been revealed. (Lukács 2003, 125)

In other words, a novelistic narrative consists, according to Lukács, of a sequence of events that are already interpreted as being somehow related to one another (even if this relation is interpreted as a non-relation), and which together form a totality. The parts or events remain, nonetheless, only abstractly related to each other, or, indeed, *interpreted* as being related – they are not organically or naturally related (as in the epic), and as such they cannot form a truthful totality, but merely an ironic totality. Time, as the ‘corrupting principle’ (122-123), is in some way an ‘effect’ of the causal structure (the causal structure being interpreted as that instance which confers meaning to the novel’s content or events as they are temporally unfolded), but an effect which ‘corrects’ the self-correction of the causal structure, in the sense that time struggles against the ironic subversion of the novel’s abstract-interpretive formalism, even if this struggle is ultimately one of failure:

Time is the fullness of life, although the fullness of time is the self-abolition of life and, with it, of time itself. The positive thing, the affirmation which the very form of the novel expresses no matter how inconsolably sad its content may be, is not only that distant meaning which dawns with a mild radiance on the far side of the search and the failure to find, but also the fullness of life which is revealed precisely through the manifold failures of the struggle and search. (123)

Through the dialectical powers of irony and time, the novel form generates a glimpse of the epic dream of the sublime, the absolute truth, which is also the point of non-interpretation – the point at which every part is truthfully and organically determined by the whole; it is at this stage that the novel can provide us with a sense of the ‘great organic life complex – a nation or a family’ (67).<sup>30</sup> In the novel, Lukács writes, ‘Everything that happens may be

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<sup>30</sup> Lukács’s notion of the ‘great organic life complex – a nation or a family’ can be seen as similar to what Fredric Jameson refers to as ‘national allegory’ in the non-western text. After having analysed, in the work *The Political Unconscious*, what he calls the ‘political unconscious’ allegory in western/postmodernist texts, Jameson’s controversial third-world thesis is that this allegory is precisely *not* unconscious in the third-world text: ‘Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*’ (Jameson 1986, 69). In Lukács’s later theories on realism, one could argue that what characterises the modality of ‘critical realism’ is precisely its conscious awareness of this political-allegorical dimension.

meaningless, fragmentary and sad, but it is always irradiated by hope or memory' (126). Time is the novel form's principle of life, which counters the ironic exposure of the inadequacies of the novel's abstract structure – its reflexive and non-organic framework of meaning – by establishing unauthorised, 'indefinable and unformulable' relations and connections. In that particular sense, time generates *experiences*, however meaningless, fragmentary or sad (that is, experiences that are not inferred to be causally determined already, but experiences that are open-ended and thus open to a form of 'immediate' experience). Time, as we saw earlier, 'rubs the sharp edges off each heterogeneous fragment and establishes a relationship – albeit an irrational and inexpressible one – between them' (125); that is to say, time sets the course toward an alternative form of experience, an opening which is made possible, and only as such, precisely because it constitutes an ironic counter-force responding to the irony produced through the abstract schematic of narrative causality.<sup>31</sup> The representational ideal becomes the novel that 'appears to be least composed' (124), that is, a *realist* ideal which basically translates, and thus de-reifies, the abstract insight of the irony into a concrete, organic experience: 'the novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life' (60).<sup>32</sup>

Lukács's notion of realism in this early work is precisely to be conceived as the attempt to *imitate an earlier, absent form* (the totality of the Homeric epos), an attempt that

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<sup>31</sup> See also Timothy Bewes' article 'The Novel as an Absence: Lukács and the Event of Postmodern Fiction' for a discussion of forms of de-reified temporal experience in *Theory of the Novel*.

<sup>32</sup> In the context of a broader discussion of realism, Christopher Prendergast observes: 'The connecting energies of realism may well be a value to hold on to in the continuing debate, in counterpoint to the fashionable emphases on dispersal and fragmentation' (Prendergast 2000, 132). The early Lukács's notion of a realist ideal constitutes, I would argue, precisely such a counterpoint, which particularly in the context of postcolonial studies, where notions of dispersal and fragmentation are indeed fashionable, may find a renewed relevance. In a recent postcolonial roundtable discussion, Fernando Coronil notes that from its beginning the field of postcolonial studies 'came to celebrate fragments disconnected from structures and cultural constructs seen independently of the mundane conditions that made them possible ... [but] If the aim of connecting knowledge and the world is to help make the world more fit for all, this connection must illuminate connections: the ensembles of relations linking parts and wholes, human creations and the conditions of their creation' (Yaeger 2007, 637).

necessarily fails, and yet through that failed effort opens up a utopian-interpretive trajectory. Realism, as the representational ideal which appears to be *least* composed, yet which in the end can never transcend its own compositionality, is thus a modality or form which according to Lukács strives for the dissolution of its formal dimension (that is, strives for an invisible, organic or natural form which demands no interpretation). The immediate, metonymic, content-based aesthetic of a realist modality is thus to be seen as one that designates a process of ‘working-through’,<sup>33</sup> a process struggling to eliminate the possibility of authoritative interpretations operating *outside* the totality of the novel form (because the totality of the novel form already must have legitimised, and hence interpreted, the signifying relations between its particular parts). This representational ideal is the closest we get to an actual reconciliation of the subject and the object in *The Theory*:

The subject’s return home to itself is to be found in this experience, just as the anticipation of this return and the desire for it lie at the root of the experience of hope. It is this return home that, in retrospect, completes everything that was begun, interrupted and allowed to fall by the way – completes it and turns it into rounded action. (128)

Lukács argues that the composition of the novel is ‘a paradoxical fusion of heterogeneous and discrete components into an organic whole which is then abolished over and over again’ (84); that is to say, the novel form interprets or infers relations between heterogeneous events, as causally connected, and thus *works through* its material in order to *produce* meaning, while also, simultaneously, showing that these relations ‘are abstractly pure and formal’ (ibid.). And it is through this process that the novel form is able to open up a utopian trajectory, striving toward a point of immediacy, of epic insight; a point where the need for interpretation ceases.

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<sup>33</sup> For the notion of ‘working through’, see also Freud’s article ‘Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through’ (*Standard Edition* vol. XII, 1958), 147-156; and Slavoj Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 1992, 55-84; as well as Peter Brooks’ *Reading for the Plot* (1984), 90-112.

## Lukács's Theory of the Novel II: Realism

'The later development of Lukács's theories on the novel' Paul de Man writes (De Man 1983, 59), thinking of Lukács's 'later dogmatic commitment to realism' (55), 'should be traced back to the reified idea of temporality that is so clearly in evidence at the end of *Theory of the Novel*' (59). There are some interesting *temporal* replacements, transferences and displacements between the theoretical dynamic of *The Theory* and Lukács's realist writings of the thirties and onwards. In *The Theory*, the novel, as a form striving for a lost epic ideal, is seen as the historically 'adequate' aesthetic response to an age of transcendental homelessness. In Lukács's later realist writings, the 'epic' dimension is now more or less coinciding with the bygone art of Balzac's realist technique, which, after the ill-fated year of 1848,<sup>34</sup> has been replaced by reified aesthetic forms of consciousness, like naturalist, descriptive techniques. 'Description', writes Lukács, 'becomes the dominant mode in composition in a period in which, for social reasons, the sense of what is primary in epic construction has been lost. Description is the writer's substitute for the epic significance that has been lost' (Lukács 1978, 127).

David Carroll has argued that Lukács's later works seem more historically concrete because

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<sup>34</sup> After the June 1848 revolution, which according to Lukács constituted the first real action of the working class, the bourgeois class felt it had to consolidate its power and guard itself against potential rivals. Thus, the bourgeois class retreated to a conservative position, whereas the working class took the progressive position (which had previously been occupied by the bourgeois class). According to Lukács, one of the consequences of this change was that the bourgeois writer, who before 1848 had been actively involved in the development of a progressive bourgeois ideology, now became disconnected from society and its ideological dynamics. If they critically confronted the conservatism of their own class, post-1848 bourgeois writers would necessarily have to break with it; and yet, 'Even the sincerely progressive Zola was incapable of such a rupture' (Lukács 1989b, 86). Although Lukács's distinction between pre-1848 writers and post-1848 writers is no doubt too sharp and perhaps also historically unreasonable, one should note that it functions in the same strategic sense as the strategic distinction he makes between the epic and the novel in *The Theory*.

(1) the abstract typology used to classify the novel in *The Theory* is replaced with a dialectical (really evolutionary) historical model, (2) more “concrete” historical details are given in the analysis of specific novels, and (3) the motive force of history is apparently located “within” history in the class struggle rather than in some idealist realm dominating history from the “outside.” (Carroll 1980, 221)

But, crucially, Carroll argues, Lukács fundamentally continues to rely on the same a-historical representational ideal, as it appears in between the two a-historical dimensions of memory and hope (i.e. a lost utopian past and a utopian future). History, and Lukács’s concept of the novel, both as it is conceived in *The Theory* and in his later theories of literary realism, will eventually cease when the broken totality has been restored (that is, in the later Lukács, when the socialist revolution achieves its ultimate goal, the classless society).

Lukács’s realist theory is, similarly to *The Theory*, one that is centred on a cognitive or epistemological perspective that involves two functions; one is the destruction of the reified capitalist reality, and the other is a reconstruction or recovering of the actual, underlying structures of reality. Since capitalist reality is heterogeneous, reifying, and alienating, it is necessary, according to the later Lukács, that art must render reality in a more intensified, condensed, and rounded form, and thus ultimately more meaningful, coherent, sensuous and *recognisable*. In order to provide this cognitive insight of recognition, Lukács reasons that the realist novel must first of all be convincing, that is, *realistic or typical*.<sup>35</sup> It must convey a sense of totality that is truly objective and organic in

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<sup>35</sup> One of the most central, and most problematic, notions in Lukács’s realist theory is no doubt ‘typicality’. The realist writer must portray characters, things or events as ‘typical’ so that they appear as ‘universal’ (and vice versa): ‘The universal appears as a quality of the individual and the particular, reality becomes manifest, and can be experienced within appearance, the general principle is exposed as the specific impelling cause for the individual case being specially depicted’ (Lukács 1978, 34-35). As Lukács stresses, this does not imply a generalisation of the individual object, although one can of course argue that this is precisely what the norm of typicality-as-universal inevitably implies. Another problem with this notion is quite simply the fact that it transfers authority *from* the literary text and *to* a particular set of extra-literary norms (of what is typical etc.), legislated by, say, the Marxist literary critic.

an *epic* sense.<sup>36</sup> From the raw, confusing and incoherent parts and elements of reality, the realist author is supposed to *select* the *determining* causes and forces, in order to construct a narrative perspective which hierarchically organises the selected elements of reality into a rounded, closed whole, where all the parts mimetically and ornamentally correlate with this whole. Within this perspective, the synthesised totality of Lukács's realist novel presupposes, before the narrative perspective can be established, an end goal which teleologically conditions or anticipates the unfolding events in the form of a retrospective insight that potentially offers the revelation of the total meaning of the narrative after the story has been told. The realist novel must fundamentally narrate from a point *after* the events, when the story already has finished, by which it can become *narratable* as a meaningful form of experience. All of this also points toward the ultimate Balzacian dimension of Lukács's realist novel, namely the omniscient narrator who, while remaining discrete and invisible, constitutes the transcendental centre of the novel along which the dynamic of the narrative events is unfolded.

Lukács's critical realism becomes the adequate modality of the novel, an adequacy which is conceived more or less in *prescriptive* terms: 'Realism ... is not some sort of middle way between false objectivity and false subjectivity, but on the contrary the true, solution-bringing third way' (Lukács 1989b, 6).<sup>37</sup> After the knotty and strenuously

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<sup>36</sup> Lukács's emphasis on totality does not imply the total portrayal of society, but rather a part which dynamically is oriented toward a whole: 'Each part, novel or short story, contains only a small segment, though complete in itself. But the greatness of [Balzac's] conception is that the whole is constantly present in the parts. Each individual novel is organically related to that whole' (Lukács 1979, 99). One should also note here that while Lukács's notion of realism often has been accused of being an example of crude, naïve transparent representation, it is rather one that involves, as Harry Shaw observes, 'a *selection* of reality, not its mere "transparent" replication. Yet, as part of his inheritance from German romantic aesthetics, he sometimes makes it seem as if he's offering an aesthetics of transparency, in suggesting that though works of art are really necessarily selective, they must *seem* to readers to leave no gaps' (Shaw 1999, 13n).

<sup>37</sup> Here it is important to distinguish critical realism from what Lukács refers to as social realism; both strive for the elimination of social contradictions, but whereas social realism often sees this elimination 'as

labyrinthine argumentation in *The Theory*, one is struck by the aggressive and assertive impatience of Lukács's direct formulations on critical realism, almost to the extent that one overlooks its resemblance to the phantasmagorical function of the epic in *The Theory*, now de-contextualised and crudely inserted within the revolutionary ethos of the Marxist Lukács.

This resemblance is nevertheless important to accentuate if we are to understand what has been seen as the later Lukács's regressive and nostalgic tendencies: 'Be like Balzac – only up-to-date!', Bertolt Brecht commented sarcastically (Brecht 1977, 76), while, like Adorno,<sup>38</sup> criticising Lukács for having produced an a-historical literary theory based on 19<sup>th</sup>-century bourgeois realism. But this argument is, however, also reductive, since although it is true that the *formal* aspects of his realist theory more or less correspond to Balzacian techniques, Lukács uses these aesthetic means in order to accentuate and contrast an objective capitalist reality that is conceived as crucially *different* from the world of Balzac; in other words, Lukács re-employs *The Theory*'s representational dynamic in order to explore and distillate, negatively, the fundamental gap separating contemporary society with a previous one.<sup>39</sup> Like *The Theory*, Lukács's realist theory is thus a poetics of

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something immediately realizable' (Lukács 1979, 120), critical realism is heavily grounded within the constraining limits of the capitalist horizon, as a 'negative perspective' (114) rather than a reconciliatory answer. Critical realism, as the 'solution-bringing third way', is thus less about offering a future solution as much as offering a *process*, a movement toward something else, i.e. the breakdown of capitalism and the emergence of the socialist state at which point critical realism 'will wither away, as the literary forms of feudalism have withered away' (115). As Laura Moss rightly observes, 'Critical realism is closer to the type of realism often written in postcolonial locations than socialist realism. Such realism offers critique of British colonialism, American neoimperialism, or consumer globalization but does not necessarily offer a "postcolonial" solution' (Moss 1998, 26).

<sup>38</sup> See Adorno's critique of Lukács in 'Reconciliation under Duress'; 151-176. For a discussion of the Frankfurt School's critical treatment of realism as part of the Enlightenment project, see Eric Downing (2000); 7-14. As I argued in chapter two, Neil Lazarus (together with Deepika Bahri) has perhaps most prominently taken up the Adornian (and hence anti-Lukácsian) perspective in postcolonial studies (a field defining itself in opposition to grand narratives like the Enlightenment project), whereas the figure of Lukács is almost non-existent (apart from a few exceptions) in contemporary postcolonial discussions (or for that matter contemporary literary discussions in general).

<sup>39</sup> According to John Frow, 'Lukács is thinking in terms of a spiralling historical movement. Thus each phase is at once progressive and yet runs parallel to a previous phase ... This may go some way toward explaining what is apparently a failure of historical awareness in Lukács's work, his absolutization of a particular form of



displacement, building on the idea that an older literary form which originated in more 'rounded' circumstances, in a different age becomes a displaced and negative image that reveals the historical dimension of the contemporary, reified society. Balzac's rounded novel form was according to Lukács originally the result of an aesthetic response that 'organically' emerged from its socio-historical circumstances; since these socio-historical circumstances have radically changed in Lukács's own time, his realist theory is not so much a nostalgic return to an earlier aesthetic mode as *such*, but rather an attempt, through this earlier, idealised, harmonic and rounded aesthetic mode, to displace and re-interpret an already interpreted and mediated (or reified) appearance of reality.

What seems to happen in between *The Theory* and the realist writings could be seen as Lukács's attempt to transfer the authority of the novel's utopian-interpretive dimension to a point *beyond* its abstract postulate, as a way of *historicising* its eidaesthetic project in a concrete, political sense.<sup>40</sup> *The Theory*'s novel is conceived as a displaced form, coming *after* the epic, melancholically reflecting and interpreting the difference or gap that separates it *historically* from a harmonious ideal remembered and anticipated. As such, *The*

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the novel as an ahistorical model of realism' (Frow 1986, 10). Literature (or the preferred kind of literary realism that Lukács advocates), as Frow rightly points out, stands in a privileged position, as a form that somehow transcends the flow of history (the ideal of literature is thus the epic, the archetype to which all great art aspires). Here I think it is important to avoid putting too much emphasis on Lukács's 'absolutization' of realism *as such*; even if Lukács advocates Balzacian realism for contemporary writers, this kind of realism is, in historical terms, nonetheless fundamentally *different* from Balzac's realism. And it is precisely this *difference*, I would argue, which makes Lukács's case for 19<sup>th</sup> century realism as a contemporary aesthetic practice profoundly critical in historical terms – a *tension* between the reified life of social existence, and an unrepresentable utopian horizon, evoking a sense of history.

<sup>40</sup> As John Frow rightly points out, 'In the later Lukács the notion of historical recurrence seems increasingly to have led him to ignore the moment of negativity he had recognized in the novel. History itself loses its uncertainty and its formlessness ... An ethical-aesthetic valuation (realism/decadence) replaces the morally neutral categories of *The Theory of the Novel*, and the bourgeois historical novel becomes ... a new manifestation of wholeness ... [But] if novelists can no longer *discover* meaning, this is nevertheless primarily a moral failing on their part, not the result of an objective social process' (Frow 1986, 11). What this means more concretely is, in Stuart Sims' words, that 'the theory-wielding critic has edged ahead of the author' (Sims 1994, 44). Whereas in *The Theory*, the novel form is primarily seen as a process of *becoming-form* (and the dialectic search for its elimination), the later Lukács's (ultimately reified and essentialised) novelistic dynamic becomes a process striving toward certain norms, as formulated and legislated by the critic.

*Theory*'s novel creates a correspondence between the historical discourse of reality, and a representational-utopian ideal which remains unattainable in its full epic scope. The novel does so, as we have seen, through an arduous dialectical trajectory which produces a negative, or abstract-fictive, truth; and it is only through this trajectory, *at work at the level of form*, that a possible utopian-redemptive glimpse of totality is created. In Lukács's 'later dogmatic commitment to realism', the novel's utopian-interpretive potential is reified, I would argue, paradoxically in an attempt to *de-reify* it. That Lukács moved toward ever more dogmatic and institutionalised formulations of aesthetic redemption, does not reflect so much a *betrayal* by the late Lukács of his earlier position (as Adorno thought), but, on the contrary, what I see as the later Lukács's attempt to stay *faithful* to the utopian-redemptive dimension, although crucially in an historical and political sense. Lukács's later realist theory attempts to de-reify and historicise *The Theory*'s abstract postulate, but also becomes the immature attempt to *end* or *eliminate* the significance of the novelistic utopian-interpretive process at work at the level of form; what is fundamentally displaced or eliminated in Lukács's later theories of realism is the arduous, *implicit* formal work that so characteristically shaped the ambiguous dialectic of the novel in *The Theory*. The later Lukács's theories of realism designate the immature attempt to find a home, identified as the true, socialist state, which becomes the crude re-contextualisation of the image of *The Theory*'s Homeric harmony. From this transcendental home, the later Lukácsian realist norm is supposed to evoke the experience of the by now lost or displaced sense of a dynamic, meaningful totality, which once framed the historically 'adequate' realisms of Balzac and the pre-1848 writers (together with an eclectic handful of post-1848 writers); the *Aufhebung* or synthesis of the phenomenal appearance of capitalist reality.

In *The Theory*, the novel is seen as an adequate form that responds to the historical problematic of modernity in which representation is no longer possible because the sense of totality is lost. In Lukács's theories of realism, the contemporary novel is now seen not so much as a historical response to the problematic of unrepresentability, or only in the most distant sense of that aspect; the aesthetic, revolting impulse 'And yet!' has been quashed or at least radically weakened by the ironic force of capitalist reification, which prevents any 'organic' or 'direct' correspondence between aesthetic expressions and the dynamic of society, even at a formal level. Despite the obvious pessimism of *The Theory*, and the apparent Marxist optimism in his later works, as some critics would have it, I would argue that the world view which forms the basis of Lukács's theories of realism from the thirties and onwards, ultimately contains a more despairing epistemology, where the contemporary society constitutes a simulacrum that has made representation all too imaginable but in a fundamentally reified way. This also means that the possibility of a direct relation between aesthetic form and the given conditions of reality is actively *repressed* by the commodifying powers of capitalism, and it is for this reason one may see Lukács's literary theory becoming increasingly dogmatic and prescriptive.<sup>41</sup> In Lukács's theories of realism,

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<sup>41</sup> This is of course also Adorno's and Brecht's argument, but in a fundamentally different sense; as I argued, I see Lukács's trajectory toward dogmatism as a dogged attempt to historicise, and thus stay faithful, to the abstract aesthetic ideal as formulated in *The Theory*. One could say that the 'central weakness in Lukács's thought ... is a failure of mediation', as John Frow has argued: 'Literature is not a conventional order of discourse; rather, literary reality is immediately identical with reality itself ... literature is based on the iconic sign: it is natural, motivated, mirroring a sense which is independent of its interpretation' (Frow 1986, 15). But such a view, I think, misses the fact that in the later Lukács the interpretive dimension of the literary has not been eliminated but rather migrated to *theory*, and that it has done so for distinctly historical reasons (regarding Lukács's rejection of vulgar materialism and the notion of a simple causal relationship between base and superstructure, see *Writer and Critic*; 62-66). One could argue that the aggressive dogmatism and determinism of Lukács's realist doctrines is precisely an expression of the awareness of the impossibility of recovering objective truth underneath the simulacrum of society – hence the *need* to change the emphasis in *The Theory*'s formulation of the relationship between society and aesthetic response. The later Lukács's concerns are moreover similar, albeit with certain historical differences, to those concerns surrounding the concretisation of utopian dreams that emerged in the immediate aftermath of decolonisation, about which I will talk more in chapter four.

the balance between the historical discourse of reality and the a-historical, fictive representational ideal is broken because the latter, fundamentally still the same as in *The Theory*, becomes the prescriptive norm by which any 'serious' author must narrate. Lukács displaces the implicit utopian-interpretive dimension, which constituted an integral part of the novelistic dynamic as conceived in *The Theory* – its ironic point of transcendence and authority – to a point *outside* the novel, namely the prescriptive, Lukácsian realist norm that re-employs the representational ideal of *The Theory*, but in a crucially 'decapitated' way; as a search that is not so much about finding, interpreting or imagining, as much as confirming or asserting a historically conditioned norm.

In between the development from *The Theory* to Lukács's realist theory, the utopian-interpretive dimension becomes increasingly reified, paradoxically through the attempt to de-reify it, that is, as a historically conditioned norm legislated by Lukács as the cultural commissar. This trajectory is thus similar to the one outlined by Nicholas Brown, and what he (following Jameson) sees as the emergence of critical theory, which takes over the eidaesthetic project, yet which at the same time becomes problematic precisely to the extent that it, in the same way as in Lukács's theories of realism, is always exposed to the danger of becoming dogmatic and prescriptive. What the early Lukács sees as the 'deepest melancholy' of the novel – its utopian-interpretive desire – is also the utopian longing toward the representation, and ultimately restoration, of a meaningful totality, toward meaning in its full essence as such. That is to say, melancholy, in Lukács's sense, *is* interpretation (a symptom as well as a pre-emptive response), but an interpretive activity which is not so much an end goal, as one that strives toward the point of its own superfluity, dissolution – its own negation; the novel's utopian-interpretive dimension works at the

level of the form (as a formal *working-through* of a dialectic trajectory of subversion, ironic self-correction and temporal reconfirmation), producing glimpses of immediate or non-interpreted experience. The realist ideal as formulated in *The Theory* must here be seen as a fundamentally *melancholic* process; the realist aesthetic attempts to overcome the mourned loss – to reconstruct meaning within the age of modernity, an age which is precisely characterised by its loss of absolute meaning (or the absence of any possibilities of recovering meaning in an absolute, truthful way).<sup>42</sup>

Lukács's later realist theory is an attempt to stay *faithful* to his early notion of realism, but in a way which paradoxically leads him to become *unfaithful*; his later realist theory demonstrates that when the novelistic utopian-interpretive dimension is displaced to a set of authoritative norms *outside* the novel form itself, melancholic recuperation is always in danger of becoming dogmatic and prescriptive – that is, as a recuperation not so much for the sake of an eidaesthetic project, but rather for the sake of confirming the legitimacy of a historically conditioned set of extra-literary norms.

### **History, Postcoloniality, and Literary Form**

Lukács's development toward an ever more prescriptive and dogmatic position echoes a specific problematic that many postcolonial writers confronted in the aftermath of the independence era, namely the *concretisation* of a utopian ideal. What often became the 'historically conditioned norm' in early postcolonial novels was the politicisation and

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<sup>42</sup> Characteristically, in the later work *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, Lukács describes *modernism* as a fundamentally melancholic act (in the sense that modernism – similarly to, albeit different from, Lukács's early notion of the novel – strives for an absolute and a-historical realm which remains unattainable, and which instead leads to reification, abstraction and destruction). I will come back to the link between melancholia and modernism in chapter five, in connection with Jameson's concept of modernism as 'cancelled realism'.

nationalisation of the concept of culture as a unifying social force, which, as Pheng Cheah points out, to some extent explains 'the remarkable affinity between decolonizing and radical postcolonial nationalism and the novelistic genre' (Cheah 2003, 239).<sup>43</sup> As a vital component in the development of organic nation-formation, many of the postcolonial novels emerging in the early phase of decolonisation embodied the teleological and causal predicament – the gradual but certain progression toward the end goal, utopia, or self-actualisation – of the nation itself.<sup>44</sup> However, Cheah observes that 'once the initial euphoria of independence had subsided in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, there was a

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<sup>43</sup> In the essay 'The National Longing for Form', Timothy Brennan argues that the novel 'is a naturally cosmopolitan form that empire has allowed to play a national role, as it were, only in an international arena' (Brennan 1990, 56). Central to this notion of the novel form, as an inherently *Eurocentric* form, are the (according to Brennan) twin projects of nationalism and realism (both ideological products of the west). The fact that the novel is the predominant genre of postcolonial literature has according to Brennan led to a paradoxical situation: 'For under conditions of illiteracy and shortages, and given simply the leisure-time necessary for reading one, the novel has been an elitist and minority form in developing countries when compared to poem, song, television, and film. Almost inevitably it has been the form through which a thin, foreign-educated stratum (however sensitive or committed to domestic political interests) has communicated to metropolitan reading publics, often in translation' (ibid.). Thus, using the novel form (and more precisely the *realist* form) is in Brennan's view problematic because it implicitly promotes Eurocentric structures, despite its political-revolutionary content. Although Lukács's theory of the novel (one of Brennan's examples) is undeniably Eurocentric in various ways (relying as it does on a universalising grand narrative of western modernity), I rather want to stress that there is also a Eurocentric aspect to an argument such as Brennan's, in the sense that it presents the non-western world as having developed more or less independently from socio-economic structures of the west (and hence necessarily must produce entirely different forms of aesthetic expressions that somehow satisfy metropolitan expectations of otherness). But as Nicholas Brown rightly points out, 'What we usually call "non-Western" literature is rarely the expression ... of some other culture, if by that we understand some other set of norms and rules that has developed along its own internal logic; rather, it must be thought of in terms of the positions that economically, ethnically, sexually, and geographically differentiated subjects occupy within the single culture of global capitalism that has more or less ruthlessly subsumed what was once a genuinely multicultural globe' (Brown 2005, 6). Within such a perspective, I think Lukács's theory of the novel (despite its shortcomings and flaws) may have something important to say in connection with the postcolonial novel, as an eidaesthetic project politically committed to a total understanding of the determining forces of global capitalism, as it affects everyday life.

<sup>44</sup> Pheng Cheah follows Benedict Anderson's discussion of the close relationship between novel and nation in *Imagined Communities* (published in 1983). Furthermore, Cheah employs Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* to emphasise the organicism of the novel form, arguing that novels of the early phase of decolonisation 'almost invariably figured the emergent nation-people as a living organism suffering from the chronic malaise of colonialism' (Cheah 2003, 239); this 'disease', according to Cheah, is 'cured' through the concept of *Bildung* as an organising principle and it is in this particular connection that the novel form plays a vital role. Similar to Fredric Jameson's notion of national allegory, Cheah argues that the 'exemplary lesson about the imperativity of national *Bildung* was invariably personified in the novel's protagonist whose formation or *Bildung* parallels and symbolizes that of the emergent nation because he is its first patriot and ideal citizen' (ibid.).

gradual tightening of control over the economic and political spheres by an indigenous bourgeois elite, often in collaboration with transnational capital' (244-245), which meant that the imaginary-progressive project of the fulfilment of a historically conditioned norm increasingly came under severe pressure.<sup>45</sup>

This failure of the postcolonial literary-eidaesthetic project is, as we have seen, intimately connected to the emergence of postcolonial *theory*, and thus related to postcolonial *melancholia* – i.e. the failure of postcolonial theory (as the 'inheritor' of the eidaesthetic project) to melancholically *absorb* or *imitate* the literary eidaesthetic project. And it is precisely in connection with the field's own melancholic pre-emptive response to this failure, that we should locate the postcolonial relevance of Lukács's theoretical framework.

Contemporary melancholia represents, as we have seen, on the one hand a symptom of commodification while on the other hand designating a pre-emptive response to this symptom. It indicates furthermore that the tacit, underlying aesthetic value-paradigm has played an active part in the commodification of the dimension of the literary. Lukács's novelistic theory, as formulated in *The Theory*, can be seen as one that attempts to identify the workings of what Žižek saw as the Marxian-Freudian hermeneutical perspective – the secret of the form itself – as the characteristic dynamic of the novel form itself. This notion also opens up the possibility of conceiving the literary as a de-commodifying, utopian-interpretive potential. At the same time, the trajectory of Lukács – from the early work to his realist writings of the thirties and onwards – contains an unintentional warning (i.e. the

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<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Nicholas Brown (following Neil Lazarus) has argued that the utopian dimension in African literature of independence was purely abstract and harmless, because it remained an 'abstract negation of the colonial system' (Brown 2005, 23) while lacking the concrete impetus that would render it genuinely revolutionary.

dogmatism of the later Lukács – the reason for which he has subsequently been most criticised), against the dangers of displacing this hermeneutical perspective to a point *outside* the form itself (i.e. as a set of prescriptive, critical norms that the literary text must ‘confirm’). Postcolonial melancholia suggests that the hermeneutical perspective has indeed been displaced in postcolonial literary criticism, and that to move beyond this impasse, we need to (re-)turn to the literary text itself.



## Part II

## Chapter Four

### Form and Temporality in Ousmane Sembene's *Xala*

#### **The Problematic of Imitativeness**

In the book *Misplaced Ideas*, the Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz outlines a problematic which, in specific ways, has played a major role in many different postcolonial countries: 'We Brazilians', Schwarz's book begins, 'constantly experience the artificial, inauthentic and imitative nature of our cultural life' (Schwarz 1992, 1). Schwarz's argument, although formulated specifically in connection with the history of Brazilian colonialism, has had a particular resonance in many former colonial countries, not only in Latin America, but throughout the non-western world – the feeling of living in an unreal society, not one's own, but imitated from another discursive reality, a society whose meaning and purpose are determined by forces apparently coming from the outside, from some alien influence; the feeling of being an inferior copy of western socio-cultural paradigms, or what one may initially call the problematic of imitativeness in postcolonial space.

At a historical and sociological level, the problematic of imitativeness first of all relates to the traumatic history of colonialism and its after-effects. In the immediate aftermath of independence, one of the central projects for many postcolonial states was to assert critical difference from imperial centres; the need for an indigenous, authentic culture had a profound impact on the formulation of a national identity, which not only could work as a bulwark against global imperialism, but also establish homogeneity of differences which had, in many cases, been arbitrarily unified during the colonial phase. Nationalism, as a binary, cultural-political, and ideological strategy, was often fuelled by the idea that among the greatest cultural concerns during the transitional phase of decolonisation was the development of an autonomous identity which had been, and still was under the threat of being, eradicated by foreign influence – the search for a legitimate, radical beginning of a proper, and properly independent, nation.

However, due to the increased awareness of the limits of nationalism, one characteristic phase of the development of many postcolonial literary traditions was the emergence of what Simon Gikandi designates ‘literature of disillusionment’ (Gikandi 1992, 378), or what Robert Fraser, in the book *Lifting the Sentence*, has called ‘narratives of internal dissent’ (Fraser 2000, 8). The cultural explorations of indigenous forms of identity in the post-independence era often led to disillusionment with the limitations of nationalism as an ideology of liberation, and the idea of the nation as a unifying image. Narratives of disillusionment raised concerns about the increased difficulties of distinguishing between real nationalist liberation ideology, which played an important part in many struggles of decolonisation, and mere spectacles of nationalist resistance, which legitimised neo-colonialism and continued modes of exploitation and oppression after independence.

National literatures of disillusionment, Gikandi argues, were ‘propelled by the belief that African countries had entered a neo-colonial phase, one in which colonial structures and institutions continued their gigantic hold on the new states wearing the ideological masks of blackness and modernity’ (Gikandi 1992, 378-379).<sup>1</sup>

Often it was the national middle class, thriving under colonialism, which took over power at the end of the colonial era – an underdeveloped class, as Frantz Fanon points out in the pivotal work *The Wretched of the Earth* from 1961, because it imitated and identified with a contemporary western bourgeois class which was already in decline, that is, fundamentally lacking the dynamic, ambitious pioneer spirit characteristic of the first historical stage of a typical bourgeois class. Unable to live up to its historical role, the native national bourgeoisie in many cases became an ‘empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been’ (Fanon 1974, 119), playing what Fanon calls the ‘cheap-jack’s function’, the ‘Western bourgeoisie’s business agent’ (122).

Within this perspective, the problematic of imitativeness must be seen as designating a gap between a cultural level in need of being *authenticated*, and a socio-economic dimension from which this level remained separated, that is, the reality of the social origins from which the cultural level emerged, and to which it was unable to respond in an *authentic* way. Roberto Schwarz outlines the manufacturing of the experience of the problematic of imitativeness in the following way – the absence of any real, determining connections between modes of production and the cultural-political superstructure

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<sup>1</sup> Yet, according to Gikandi, this notion of independence was ultimately wrong because it was based on a misunderstanding, ‘not so much of the terms of liberation and its narrative claims, but of the possibilities of an epistemological revolution inherent in the decolonization gesture’ (Gikandi 1992, 379). Gikandi here refers to an argument made by Neil Lazarus in the book *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*, in which the latter writes that the literature of disillusionment of the sixties critically attempted to come to terms with the ‘prevalent way of thinking about post-colonialism, as it was articulated during that decade ... predicated upon a preliminary over-estimation of the emancipatory potential of independence’ (Lazarus quoted in Gikandi 1992, 379).

generates a sense of imitativeness, that is, at a *cultural* level; the experience of imitativeness leads to an intensified nationalist desire for the rejection of foreign influence – but the cause of the imitative is not, in the first instance, the ‘foreign’ but rather dissonances emerging from the internal socio-economic formations, as, in many cases quite literally, a systematic continuation of colonial structures of exploitation, resumed by a native ruling class. Transforming, in an ideologically coded way, the experience of actual, social contradictions into the experience of a problematic of imitativeness, allowed the ruling native class to legitimise the continued preservation of colonial systems of exploitation.<sup>2</sup> The schizophrenia, as involved in the experience of imitativeness, was in this sense a direct symptom of a contradictory ideological impulse, which on the level of a cultural logic strived for authentication, while at the same time, and through that very gesture, legitimised an exploitative socio-economic reality. The experience of imitativeness, the effect, was thus transformed into a perceived cause, namely as the ‘foreign’, whereas the real effect had in many cases been caused by a ruling, national bourgeois class’s ideological interest in the continuation of a reactionary system, originating in colonial time.

The national middle class came, in other words, to be seen as a serious threat to the unfolding of a genuine national consciousness, as ‘the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people’ (19).<sup>3</sup> The national framework, which in many cases

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<sup>2</sup> As Roberto Schwarz notes, ‘copying’ or ‘imitating’ did not constitute a specifically national problem *before* independence. Quite often it was associated with something prestigious and attractive, such as power and wealth, at least for a particular class. This is reflected in many colonial and imperial narratives that were written by an imitating elite class which, roughly, was in complicity with, and educated by, the ruling colonisers. *Before* independence, that is to say, the gap between an elite class and the mass was in many colonies not considered to be an absurdity; rather, it was widely accepted as the norm (see Schwarz 1992, 12).

<sup>3</sup> Referring to Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, Simon Gikandi denounces the idea that ‘national consciousness’ should be the solution of the postcolonial problem: ‘Because the colonial ideological machinery was driven by what Fanon saw as a perverted logic, one bent on distorting, disfiguring and destroying the oppressed people and their history, the narrative of liberation derived its authority from its

had been a colonial imposition, raised a series of inevitable problematics regarding the homogenisation and repression of issues such as class, language, geography, identity politics, gender, and religion.<sup>4</sup>

### Intermediary Dreams

Ousmane Sembene's short novel *Xala*, which first appeared in 1973 and the following year was turned into a successful film (made by Sembene himself),<sup>5</sup> touches upon many of these issues in a distinct way; indeed, it has often been read as the classic novelistic formulation of the scenario that Frantz Fanon, and other intellectuals, warned against – that in many cases it was the native middle class which took hold of the control of the country after colonisation, and that this class according to Fanon was underdeveloped because it imitated a contemporary, declining western bourgeois class.<sup>6</sup>

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capacity to realize the “truths of the nation”. The African problematic was hence defined by its manichean relationship to the very colonial culture it sought to negate’ (Gikandi 1992, 378).

<sup>4</sup> In *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin write: ‘the bases of the post-colonial state were themselves far less radical than their early exponents believed, and the degree to which they incorporated models and institutions based on the European concept of a nation created the continuing linkages that allowed the neo-colonialist control of these states to operate so effectively’ (Ashcroft et al. 2000, 154-155).

<sup>5</sup> Generally, Sembene is hailed by many critics as the founder of African cinema (see in particular David Murphy's recent study *Sembene: Imagining Alternatives in Film & Fiction* from 2001).

<sup>6</sup> For example, Françoise Pfaff writes: ‘*Xala* ... is a perfect illustration of ... Frantz Fanon’ (Pfaff 1984, 149). It should be noted that Pfaff refers to the film version of *Xala*, but since her comments primarily are orientated toward the *story* of *Xala*, they could equally be orientated toward the novel as well. Another critic, Ogunjimi Bayo, writes: ‘This is the central message of Ousmane in *Xala*. The thematic emphasis is on the satirical exposure of the errandboy function of those Fanon refers to as “tin-pot bourgeoisie”’ (Bayo 1985, 133). Quoting Fanon, Thomas J. Lynn argues that ‘El Hadji symbolizes the post-independence African middle class that wrested to itself colonial privileges while forgetting the needs of the rest of its nation – whose resources it used to gain power’ (Lynn 2003, 192). Joseph Gugler and Oumar Cherif Diop note that ‘Sembène's portrayal of the beggars echoes Fanon's faith in the revolutionary potential of the *lumpenproletariat*’ (Gugler & Diop 1998, 149).

Ousmane Sembene was born in Senegal in 1923, and is generally regarded as one of the most important Francophone authors in Africa.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to many other African writers, Sembene did not come from the middle-class, but the working class, and the issue of class consciousness plays a role in all of his works. Sembene debuted as a writer in the 1950s with some shorter texts, like *Le Docker noir* (1956) and *O Pays, mon beau peuple!* (1957), but it was not until the publication of the social realist novel *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* in 1960, that he achieved critical acclaim; a novel for which he probably remains best known. Sembene's writings, films and social activities have often provoked anger and sometimes led to censorship, particularly during the regime of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Senegal's first president (who of course is also a major literary figure in his own right). In 1959, Senegal had joined the French Sudan to form the federation of Mali, and it became independent from France on 20 June, 1960, a year of liberation for most of France's African colonies. In August the same year, however, Senegal separated from the federation, after which Senghor was elected as the first president of Senegal ever (his presidency lasted until 1980). If Sembene's earlier focus primarily had been centred around the proletarian organisation against foreign influence, the novels produced in the aftermath of independence dealt more specifically with the practices of the new nation and the political problems that followed in the postcolonial era – a focus which is particularly emphasised in for example *Xala*.

*Xala* begins with a group of Senegalese 'businessmen' celebrating the first ever governmental election of one of its members as 'president of the chamber of commerce and

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<sup>7</sup> Ousmane Sembene died June 10, 2007. For an historical overview of Ousmane Sembene's career and the extraordinarily fertile artistic environment in Senegal's independence era from which his works emerged, see David Murphy's *Sembene: Imagining Alternatives in Film & Fiction*.

industry' in the nation's short history.<sup>8</sup> Originally, these businessmen – leading representatives of the native bourgeois class of Senegal – have come together from different sectors of the industry in order to 'combat the invasion of foreign interests' (Sembene 1976, 1). Their declared goal, we are told, is to 'gain control of their country's economy' (ibid.), to 'achieve economic independence' (2); and the election of one of their members as the president of the 'chamber of commerce and industry' apparently marks an important milestone in that direction. However, the inverted commas framing the words 'businessmen' and 'Businessmen's group', as well as the satiric comments inserted by the anonymous narrator – e.g. 'Perhaps because of their megalomania, they always referred to the "Chamber of Commerce and Industry" as "the Chamber"' (ibid.) – alert us to the fact that 'this memorable day' (ibid.) is tinged with irony;<sup>9</sup> that it is an occasion which allows them to forget even further the realities of the country's situation, as well as their own compromised roles.

Much emphasis in the novel is put on the businessmen's apparent wealth and power – expensive cars, European suits, large houses, distinguished titles, and pompous rhetoric – yet the very reason for their alliance in the first place was precisely that they *lacked* real power and wealth; and while they have obtained a 'foothold in the wholesale trade' (1) in the meantime – that is, during the time after they have formed the group – they nonetheless remain excluded from having any real influence on the market. Hotels, restaurants, banks and car companies are still largely in the hands of foreigners. The election of one of their

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<sup>8</sup> Although no specific, historical dates are given, it would be fair to assume that the story of the novel, and the film, roughly takes place around the beginning of the seventies – around ten to thirteen years after independence – i.e. at the time the novel was written. For specific historical details about the *Chambre de Commerce* in Senegal, see Gugler and Diop (1998); 154n

<sup>9</sup> Gloria Nne Onyeoziri notes 'how the narrator distances himself ... (using quotation marks in the original)' (Onyeoziri 2003, 110), which produces an 'ironic attitude toward El Hadji' (ibid.).



members to the presidency of 'the Chamber of commerce and industry' may give them renewed hope, but in actuality the president is powerless, exerting little more authority than a pasteboard figure. Indeed, the novel stresses in various ways the gap or incommensurability existing between the *appearance* and *actuality* of their situation. Further enhancing this sense of a gap between appearance and actuality are the numerous variations of the motif of the 'intermediary'; almost every character in the novel is situated in between someone, or something, for example the president, who tells El Hadji that he is 'only an arbitrator' (77); or the 'toubab' [white person] representing 'Automobile Credit', who says that he is 'only a messenger' (88); or indeed all of the 'pompous' businessmen whom the narrator designates as 'nothing more than middlemen' (55).<sup>10</sup>

The gap between appearance and actuality is no more evident than in the hapless unravelling of El Hadji's life, the actual story of *Xala*, which not only cruelly exposes the extent of the businessmen's powerlessness as well as the hollowness of their actions, but also their hypocrisy – their *unwillingness* to actually combat foreign interests, which, as we heard, was their original goal. The businessmen are unwilling to stay true to their declared intentions in actuality because the *credit*, allowing them to maintain a prestigious appearance, still largely flows from foreign hands. As soon as cracks begin to emerge in their *appearance* as honourable businessmen and members of the society, they take swift and merciless action, as for example when El Hadji's financial excesses threaten their

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<sup>10</sup> Significantly, after El Hadji has been cured by Sereen Mada, whom he has paid by cheque in reward, a person who apparently has 'been sent by Sereen Mada' (Sembene 1976, 89) shows up at El Hadji's office, informing him that the cheque has bounced; but El Hadji does not recognise that this person is none other than Sereen Mada himself – there is no gap between the appearance and the actual person of Sereen Mada, yet El Hadji, busy with 'entangling himself in vague explanations' (90), has already forgotten everything about the marabout.

credibility; to restore the trust that has been damaged, El Hadji must be dissociated from them – expelled, sacrificed.

Expulsion is not an uncommon thing within the dog-eat-dog ethos of the businessmen, we are told: 'He [El Hadji] knew very well that he was being threatened by them. He himself had behaved in the same way towards one of their number whom they had wanted to expel on a previous occasion' (78). When it is his turn to be thrown out of the group, the novel ironically allows a striking constellation to emerge; criticising his colleagues, El Hadji's speech for the first and only time in the entire novel seems *truthful*, a speech which at the same time designates the culmination of his hypocrisy: 'What are we', he shouts to his colleagues, 'Mere agents, less than petty traders! We merely redistribute. Re-distribute the remains the big men deign to leave us. Are we businessmen? I say no! Just clodhoppers' (83).<sup>11</sup> The objectivity of this truth is of course completely undermined by the fact that its bearer, once a revolutionary in his past, has long ago lost all possibilities of uttering such a truth with any credibility – any authority at all – as one of El Hadji's colleagues plainly points out: 'We aren't at the theatre. You're up to your neck in muck and you preach revolution to us. You should have thought of all that before' (84). One may see this as one of the ways in which the novel constructs a discourse in which the notion of truth can only emerge in negative form – as a truth which at this point has become identical

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<sup>11</sup> Fírinne Ní Chréacháin-Adelugba argues that in Sembene's novel *God's Bits of Wood*, we similarly see an example of a speech which contains truth, but within an entirely different context – the speech is used as a genuine weapon against the foreign colonisers, spoken by an authentic revolutionary. In contrast, 'El Hadji uses [his defence speech] as a final desperate smokescreen to protect his own skin' (Chréacháin-Adelugba 1979, 101). Whereas in *God's Bits of Wood* Sembene focuses on class nuances in post-independence Senegal, 'Thirteen years later [i.e. in *Xala*], they are no more to be seen. The classes in *Xala* have been polarized into the up-and-coming local middlemen, on the one hand, and on the other, the beggars ... And ... what a bunch of grotesque monsters they are, deliberately dehumanized by Ousmane, perhaps to underline the extent to which they have been dehumanized by "independent" Senegal' (91-92). If *God's Bits of Wood* is a novel that presents a social vision of the collective problems facing a newly independent nation, *Xala* offers a narrow and privatised vision of disillusion and dehumanisation around a decade later.

with the ultimate form of theatre, or fiction, namely El Hadji reiterating the *original* purpose of their group; to gain control of the banks, insurance companies, factories, businesses, wholesale trade, cinemas, bookshops and hotels.

That the revival of the original purpose of the businessmen's group, to gain economic independence, in this particular context has become the ultimate *fiction* shows, at one level, how the consequences of critical truth are neutralised, precisely because truth has no longer any legitimate bearer, agent – no legitimate *form* in which it can appear as genuine, and not as theatre. Moreover, the fact that El Hadji should have thought about revolutionary critique *before* his financial downfall, insofar as it should have sounded *genuine*, also exposes a temporal problematic; in *Xala*, the notion of a 'before' signifies something unsettled – a dimension which cannot be translated properly into the narrative of the present. It is as if the past constitutes a dimension haunting a neurotically amnesiac present; a past to which the present is indebted, and which it cannot *afford* to remember insofar as it wants to maintain its appearance – except when the appearance of the present begins to crack. El Hadji's case represents such a crack; but while his defence speech constitutes a rare moment of truth, it is a truth embodied, framed, double-exposed and satirised through an utterly hypocritical agent, one that undermines the possibility of reconciling the repressed, forgotten past with the appearance of the present.

### **Theatricality and Temporality**

*Xala* weaves together a frantic narrative plot, spanning from the celebration of the presidential election to the beggars' humiliation of El Hadji, which occasionally is punctured by digressive references to some of the characters' past. We hear that El Hadji

once was a primary school teacher, and that he was involved in trade-union activities, fighting actively against the foreign colonisers. Moreover, we hear that it was because of his involvement in radical activities, that El Hadji lost his job and subsequently embarked on a career as a corrupt businessman. In the world of business, El Hadji made a number of connections with foreign investors, and, in the aftermath of Senegal's independence, rose to become an important and well-known citizen in Dakar *because* of these connections. Paid by overseas investors, as well as being a corrupt board member of local companies, we are told that El Hadji 'played his various roles well but, although the law was fooled, everyone knew what was really happening' (3). Given the hints to a past as a political activist, the character we meet in *Xala* comes across as a particularly striking emblem of the hypocrisy and corruption of the post-independence middleclass, still reaping the benefits of the colonial system. In fact, El Hadji is the embodiment of a social contradiction, or, as the novel suggests, a 'synthesis of two cultures: business had drawn him into the European middle class after a feudal African education. Like his peers, he made skilful use of his dual background, for their fusion was not complete' (4).<sup>12</sup>

If the 'incomplete fusion' of El Hadji's character suggests that he is not the person he pretends to be – i.e. a radical nationalist struggling for economic independence – but playing a *role*, a 'clodhopper' or a colonial 'errand boy',<sup>13</sup> it means moreover that the world

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<sup>12</sup> Another aspect reflecting El Hadji's dual, and inauthentic, character is his religious identity: El Hadji has gained the right to his Moslem name (i.e. 'El Hadji') after having made a pilgrimage to Mecca. He is, however, not particularly religious; rather, as with much else in his life, the pilgrimage seems to have been undertaken primarily with the aim of adding further prestige to his social reputation and his business name. As Kenneth Harrow writes: 'A <<Hadj>> who drinks and steals, evoking his <<religious patrimony>> to justify his greed and desire for a pretty, young wife; who sleeps through the hours of prayers and seeks a cure from holy men so he can fornicate; whose prosperity is won by theft and who lacks in real charity for the poor – in all respects is really the opposite of a pilgrim of great piety, which is the meaning of the title <<Hadj>>' (Harrow 1980, 186).

<sup>13</sup> A symbolic object in the text which mockingly echoes the roles played by the businessmen is the often-mentioned tailor's dummy, standing still and silent, wearing a crown on its head. When the beggars humiliate

we encounter in *Xala*, i.e. El Hadji's world, is not the one it appears to be. We are told that El Hadji's import-export shop, 'which he referred to as his "office"' (55), is in fact a large ware-house, full of 'flies, cockroaches and geckos' (26), 'rented from a Lebanese or a Syrian' (55), in which 'He had made a den for himself in a corner, calling it his 'office'. He had furnished it with metal cupboards that had slots labelled with the months and the years' (56). Again, the repeated use of quotation marks seems to suggest the presence of irony; El Hadji's business is of course *real* in the sense that it constitutes the financial source of his existence, but it is also a business explicitly made to *look* real, thus suggesting that it is in need of a supplementing 'reality effect'.

Another ironic contrast emerges during the elaborate description of the three villas, owned by El Hadji's wives; all of the villas are located in expensive, urban areas, screened off and protected from the misery and poverty of the rest of the city, of which we get no real sense (except only marginally), and thus further adding to the novel's emphasis on the *un-reality* of El Hadji's world; an illusory world, refusing to confront its surrounding realities. Adja Awa Astou's villa is protected by 'officers of the peace'; a 'well kept bougainvillea hedge surrounded the house, and the wrought-iron front door bore an enamel plaque inscribed with the words "Villa Adja Awa Astou"' (11). Oumi N'Doye's villa is 'identical with the first's except for the hedge. Trees provided shade at the front' (14). Money, prestige, and fashion seem to be Oumi N'Doye's main occupation, yet we also get a sense of her desperate situation, unloved and undesired, ageing, becoming increasingly superfluous. When El Hadji runs out of money, she immediately leaves him, moving back to the poverty of her family, but adapting successfully to a freer, more outgoing life. The

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El Hadji, he literally *becomes* this dummy, standing still and silent, while a man places the wedding crown 'on El Hadji's head' (Sembene 1976, 103).

third wife, N'Gone, also comes from a poor background; her villa, 'which was of recent construction, stood outside the more heavily populated residential area in a new suburb intended for people of means' (17). When El Hadji's business collapses, N'Gone and her family empty their villa, just like Oumi empties hers, whereas the beggars vandalise Adja's villa. None of the villas provide a sense of 'home', a permanent space of safety and stability.

The two main events in the beginning of the novel – the theatrical celebration of the presidential election and the staged wedding<sup>14</sup> – initially seem to suggest occasions marking development and progression, but, as we know, they in fact designate the opposite; the celebration of the election does explicitly *not* mean more power or more independence to the local bourgeoisie, quite the contrary;<sup>15</sup> and the wedding does not lead to marital bliss or reproduction, but to social tragedy and impotence. While El Hadji, and the characters related to him, may celebrate specific events that evoke promises of progress and development, these events merely mark empty, illusory and wholly theatrical gestures covering, temporarily, a world in which there is nothing at all to celebrate.

The descriptive, yet laconic, and distanced, narrator's voice evokes an atmosphere of an impersonal space, dressed in faked spectacles and inauthentic gestures, but lacking any real human dynamics. The physical architecture in *Xala* remains framed (in a literal sense by quotation marks) and commodified; an architecture robbed of real progression and

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<sup>14</sup> El Hadji is to be married to N'Gone, whom we hear is 'the child of national flags and hymns' (Sembene 1976, 7), thus, symbolically, marrying himself to the myth of a new nation. Quickly, however, when everything starts to go wrong because of the xala, El Hadji regrets: 'He returned to reality like a drowning man who reaches the surface and finds he can breathe again' (26). The wedding also raises the issue of polygamy, of which the narrator seems to take an unfavourable view, as illustrated through descriptions of the pain and suffering felt by El Hadji's first two wives, as well as Rama's and Papa John's critical comments. For a discussion of polygamy in *Xala*, see Keith Walker (1999); 135-138

<sup>15</sup> The president's speech evokes an illusion of a radical departure in the country's history: 'Since the beginning of the foreign occupation no African has ever been President of the Chamber ... In appointing me to this post of great responsibility our government has acted with courage and shown its determination to achieve economic independence in these difficult times. This is indeed an historical occasion' (Sembene 1976, 2). When the businessmen are no longer able to obtain credit from the foreigners, after El Hadji's financial excess has discredited them, they nonetheless find themselves in a position just as helpless as before.

development – as if time, in these surroundings, has been archived indefinitely in the metal cupboards with slots labelling months and years that give El Hadji's corner an 'office-like' appearance. In the commodified world of El Hadji, the constant question pervading all situations, scenes, actions and gestures seems to circle around capital and money, evoking a homogeneous, repetitive world. People echo each other, for example Mactar, Adja's son, who asks: 'Father, can you give me some money for school?' (13). A little later, Mariem, Oumi's daughter, asks: 'Father, can you give me some money?' (15). N'Gone is married to El Hadji (because of his wealth), who in return bestows her with expensive gifts as 'proofs of love' (4); and all the marabouts, as the novel patiently records, are paid handsomely. El Hadji repeatedly, and one-dimensionally, pays his way through the world to get what he wants – to satisfy his desire, to demonstrate wealth, to win forgiveness or merely get peace. Everyone wants something of El Hadji: 'Assailed on all sides, El Hadji made promises. To have some peace he gave them money' (61).

The world of El Hadji, in which everyone is busy scheming and plotting, seems unable to evoke a sense of concrete and immediate action, despite its attempts to *compensate* for the lack of presence – through the narrativization of a gradually escalating string of frenzy and frantic scenes or tableaux, between which no real causal power can be formed, scenes which merely suspend real action in the narrative. Symbolically, this lack of coherence is illustrated through the depiction of the relations between the families; Awa and Oumi have only met a few times, despite the fact that they have been married to the same man for many years; in the mini-bus, the kids settle themselves in segregated rows; Rama refuses to allow Oumi's kids move to their villa, after El Hadji has gone bankrupt; and when El Hadji has no money left, the families split up. Connections seem to be made

only in a highly mechanised way; much of the action in the plot consists of El Hadji driving from family to family, to business, and to visit marabouts. Cars are obviously symbols of power in the novel, as is evident for example after the business meeting in the beginning of the novel, when 'a line of expensive cars was waiting for them' (3). As a sign of his 'love' and 'devotion', El Hadji gives his new wife 'a two-seater car with a white ribbon tied in a bow like an Easter egg' (11). When he regrets the marriage, El Hadji reflects that 'to drop her after all he had spent seemed intolerable. There was the car' (26). Yay Bineta, the arch-schemer of the novel, does not trust El Hadji's intentions and hides the 'key and the licence for the car under her cloth' (30). Yet the car also becomes a shelter for El Hadji, a space in which he can allow himself to feel helpless and desperate (which he, pointedly, is not allowed in public or in front of his family – hence the social tragedy of the *xala*, a private secret that becomes public). If much of the narrative dynamic symbolically is invested in the motif of the car, the irony is of course that this dynamic is only made possible because of the credit of foreigners, who eventually seize the car – and hence the narrative dynamic of the novel.

The story of *Xala* is characterised by frequent, albeit indefinite, temporal markers, such as 'three days later' or 'two or three days previously', through which the plot inches its way ahead, until all of a sudden we are told that El Hadji's employees have not been paid 'for more than two months' (76), and a little later, that he has not made payments on his cars 'for three months now' (87). If El Hadji forgets time in the immediate present, overshadowed by the far-reaching implications of the *xala*, his financial commitments remind him that his time is one that is cut out in regular, payable instalments. Even if there are numerous temporal markers in *Xala*'s plot, these merely seem to add to the suspension



of a proper, utopian-interpretive narrative dynamic; time remains wholly abstract, empty. El Hadji's world lacks, in other words, a narrative dynamic which can *explain* and *work through* the relations between surroundings and characters, except in a wholly negative way. As such, it appears as a de-historicised, contemporised, and flattened world, one that lacks depth or proper background (except in fragments) – an *unreal* world.

The world that El Hadji inhabits (together with the characters related to him, professionally or privately) appears largely as a theatre – one that is marked by a temporal modality similar to what Walter Benjamin has called 'homogeneous, empty time' (Benjamin 1999, 252). According to Benjamin, in the age of 'homogeneous, empty time' the actual experience of being located in time is replaced by a phantasmagorical shadow play of constantly illuminating and substituting processes of infinite differentiations, a *positivist* notion of time reflecting the permanent absence of any substantiality and identity in a world where the relation between meaning and things has become projective and abstract, repeatedly re-emerging in new fashions.<sup>16</sup>

Time, as a qualitative dimension (in contrast to 'homogeneous, empty time'), cannot play a constructive role in El Hadji's present; indeed, it *must* not play a constructive role, insofar as the present must remain a theatre, a spectacle.<sup>17</sup> The world of El Hadji is one in which truth has no longer any legitimate form, or agent, no bearer – truth is not allowed a

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<sup>16</sup> Homogeneous, empty time is a mechanised temporal experience – a commodified time, or, the time of commodities. Commodified time is quantitatively differentiated through a system of exchange, whose emptiness is illusorily covered in what Benjamin sees as the constantly regenerating dynamic of fashion or novelty.

<sup>17</sup> It is precisely *because* time as a constitutive force eventually is introduced in El Hadji's theatrical, static world that it unravels in the way it does. What corrupts El Hadji's life, indeed *suspends* it, is ironically the reinsertion, the return, of the true past. Even if he spends much energy on the search for a cure, El Hadji's life remains suspended. We get the impression that El Hadji is elsewhere for much of the novel (during which people are scheming and plotting), even if he is present; when he is together with the family, he agrees to everything thoughtlessly to get peace; in the cinema, 'His thoughts were elsewhere' (Sembene 1976, 60); and as a businessman, he sits in his office for over two months, doing little else than to speculate about his xala.

form within the present of El Hadji's world – precisely because it is a world whose relationship to the past is radically inconsistent. There is a temporal inconsistency at the heart of El Hadji's world of theatre, a corruption of time that is repressed for ideological reasons; El Hadji and his business colleagues – the native, national bourgeoisie – must transform the present into a theatre in order to repress the fact that their doings and actions are fundamentally in contradiction with their radical and revolutionary goals and aims as formulated in the past. To legitimise their positions and actions in the *present*, they must conceive the *past* in an ideologically coded way – as 'finished' or 'overcome', in the sense that a 'before' no longer plays any actuality; they must construct the present as one ultimately *independent* from the past – the past of the colonisers, as well as their own compromised roles in the past. But as the novel demonstratively points out, independence is precisely what they have *not* achieved; what they have achieved is the licence to play roles in an imaginary world in which independence *appears* to have been achieved.<sup>18</sup> This is an imaginary world cut off from the crimes and betrayals of the past, for example El Hadji's crime – the fact that he stole another man's land and ordered this man to be imprisoned and tortured – which El Hadji cannot *afford* to remember in the present, which must remain forgotten, repressed. This imaginary world is of course also wholly impotent, as the *xala* symbolically illuminates, wholly reified, precisely because it remains de-temporalised, and de-historicised.

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<sup>18</sup> In the film-version of *Xala*, the bribery of the businessmen is made even more explicit; in the beginning of the film, foreign investors hand over briefcases full of money to the businessmen, which they zealously watch over.

## History as Still Life

In the essay 'Travelling Theory Reconsidered', Edward Said proposes the thesis that Frantz Fanon may have been inspired by Lukács's concept of reification, when he wrote the work *The Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>19</sup> In this work, Fanon accentuates the artificiality of the polarised colonial world, in which the native is dehumanised and reified, and warns that this faked spectacle may be continued by an inauthentic national bourgeoisie in the postcolonial world. *Xala* portrays a reified world of post-independent Senegal, echoing in an uncanny way Fanon's description of the motionless, un-dynamic colonial world. The similarities between Fanon's analysis of the colonial world and *Xala*'s neo-colonial situation also reveal a deeper affinity at the level of form, which may become clearer if we trace Fanon's alleged source of inspiration one step further, namely to the literary reflections that accompanied Lukács's concept of reification.

In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon warned against the empowerment of a national bourgeoisie, which, after the revolutionary stage, would eventually decay and become stagnant, clinging to power for the sake of power rather than introduce genuine social reforms.<sup>20</sup> In Lukács's development of the concept of reification, we equally find a notion of decadence and decay in relation to the national bourgeoisie; after the confrontation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in 1848 (as I discussed in chapter three),

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<sup>19</sup> According to Edward Said, Fanon does, contrary to Lukács, not strive for reconciliation or synthesis: 'The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity ... No conciliation is possible, for of the two terms, one is superfluous' (Fanon 1974, 30). The colonial antinomy is to Fanon un-resolvable, since the subject-position, that is, the coloniser within this dialectic, represents 'a foreign intrusion that has completely distorted the native presence' (Said 2001, 448). Nationalism, to Fanon, is only one step toward freedom, since what is bound to happen, he argues, is that the national bourgeois class will seize power, leading to neo-colonialism.

<sup>20</sup> There are several reasons for this reversal, Fanon points out, the most explicit one being the fact that it is an *under-developed* class: 'It has practically no economic power ... Neither financiers nor industrial magnates are to be found within this national middle class. The national bourgeoisie of under-developed countries is not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labour; it is completely canalized into activities of the intermediary type' (Fanon 1974, 120).

bourgeois literature – previously constituting a vital part of social critique – becomes superficial and empty, reflecting the interests of a class that no longer wishes to see history as anything but static and unchanging. After 1848, Lukács argues, the bourgeois author becomes a passive, and paralysed, observer.

Lukács's somewhat schematic notion of the year of 1848 also explains the curious fact in his realist writings that he attributes a revolutionary potential to bourgeois-realist aesthetics, which, as several critics have pointed out, thus becomes an *a-historical* potential.<sup>21</sup> But Lukács's point is that the potential of a bourgeois-realist aesthetic stems entirely from the time *before* 1848; before that year, the bourgeois class was according to Lukács radical because it was liberating itself from feudalism, whereas after that year, it had gained power and thus was no longer in a position of struggle, but rather one of conservatism. Replacing the once youthful and radical bourgeois class was the proletariat, struggling to liberate itself from the bourgeois class; to struggle against the bourgeois class, the proletariat was situated in a position whereby it could *repeat* the earlier radical formation of this class, and thus moreover *reuse* its 'weapons' – the bourgeois-realist aesthetics as produced before 1848. Critical realism, as a revolutionary aesthetics, must according to Lukács be repeated at different, transformative stages of history, until the final resolution has been achieved, the socialist state.

Lukács's Marxist notion of history is moreover one that is based on the idea that beneath the chaotic surface of reality, an immanent, overall logic can be recovered through the right aesthetic means. History is fundamentally a meaningful, purposeful *telos*, which,

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<sup>21</sup> As I noted previously, the early Lukács in *Theory of the Novel* also operates with a notion of a 'fall', namely the fall from the epic world and into modernity; in the later Lukács, this fall is repeated, but in a historicised form, as the year of 1848. Lukács's bourgeois-realist aesthetics inscribes a notion of a unity, as the end goal of history, which great literature anticipates – as a repetitive evocation of an original, lost unity.

however, always appears in a form in need of interpretation. Most conspicuously, this view forms the basis of Lukács's magisterial work *The Historical Novel*, published in 1937. The pre-1848 bourgeois historical novel constitutes according to Lukács an interpretational paradigm confronting, aesthetically, the disruptive experience of history; the historical novel builds on the concept of a linear-irreversible temporal dimension, in which the past is seen as constituting the preconditions, the pre-history, of the formation of the present, reconciling concrete experience with the meaning of history as such.

After the 'fall' in 1848, a new type of historical novels arises, among which Lukács mentions Flaubert's *Salammbô* (published in 1862) as a key example. Lukács accuses Flaubert of projecting a modern, that is, contemporary, experience of confusion and alienation onto a strongly stylised and exotic picture of a distant past, without paying attention to the necessity of historical continuity:

[Flaubert] chooses an historical subject whose inner social-historical nature is of no concern to him and to which he can only lend the appearance of reality in an external, decorative, picturesque manner by means of the conscientious application of archaeology. But at some point he is forced to establish a contact with both himself and the reader, and this he does by modernizing the psychology of his characters. (Lukács 1989a, 188-189)

Lukács's critique of Flaubert's historical novel correlates more generally with his critique of naturalism. Naturalism, Lukács argues, becomes an inevitable artistic modality in the wake of 1848, embodying an ideologically coded desire of the bourgeois class for a static, deterministic, a-historical, and unchanging society; an artistic modality which is radically false, because it portrays the dynamics of history and society as fundamentally meaningless, incoherent, arbitrary, and immobile – without perspective, direction or end goal in sight. In naturalism, history is portrayed as a lifeless, dead subject; naturalism is, in Lukács's view, a narrative modality that *suspends* narrativity and representativity, as a critical,

interpretational category. In the 1936-essay 'Narrate or Describe?', Lukács argues that in a proper, organic narrative form (i.e. narrative form before 1848), descriptive elements are always inserted within an overall narrative dynamic to which they contribute in a meaningful way; in bourgeois literatures after 1848 (i.e. naturalist novels such as Zola's), these descriptive elements are given equal importance *in themselves*, which according to Lukács disrupts and undermines the unfolding of a proper narrative dynamic, the unfolding of a narrative interpretive-utopian perspective, because everything becomes flattened, fetishised, incoherent or independent: 'Description contemporizes everything. Narration recounts the past' (Lukács 1978, 130).

### Still Life and Otherness

Naturalist literature, according to Lukács, is a surface aesthetics, one that no longer seems occupied with the 'inner' dynamics of society – the 'real' moments of struggles and revolutionary events within the totality of history, which thus become disguised or distorted by the concerns of the immediate present. 'The result', Lukács ominously writes, 'is a series of static pictures, of still lives connected only through the relations of objects arrayed one beside the other according to their own inner logic, never following one from the other, certainly never one out of the other' (Lukács 1978, 144).

The theatricality of El Hadji's world suggests that the connection to *reality*, the relation between El Hadji (and the world he represents), and the country as a whole, is one that is drained of meaning, a relation that is broken, or perhaps rather *repressed*.<sup>22</sup> El

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<sup>22</sup> Sigmund Freud operates with three, temporally linked, notions of repressions; the *Ur*-repression, the actual repression and the return of the repressed. The first refers to the repression of instinctual object-choices, eliminating the transference to consciousness, including for example cultural taboos of incest and so on. The second refers to the repression of imaginations or traces that may be related or associated to the object of the

Hadji's world lacks genuine interaction, a world which only *appears* to be dynamic while in fact being an empty spectacle. This world of appearances is, at the same time, one that seeps through most of the novel's layers of representativity as an ideological strategy of containment. Only through the *cracks* of this world of appearances do we see traces of another, different form of reality, traces that illuminate the theatricality of El Hadji's world.

Although there is a clear emphasis on the dimension of mobility in the text – i.e. El Hadji constantly roaming here and there in his Mercedes, more and more frantically so as the narrative progresses – this dimension does not signify concrete power, but rather powerlessness in disguise; the car functions, as mentioned, as a temporary shelter for El Hadji, sheltering his insecurity and uncertainty, while preventing him, temporarily, from realising that he has no permanent home. Significantly, when El Hadji and Modu (El Hadji's faithful driver) travel to the distant village of Sereen Mada (who lives close to Modu's home town), the Mercedes proves to be inadequate, and they are forced to change to a horse-drawn cart.<sup>23</sup> The narrative slows down its pace, to a point at which everything almost stands still:

The baobabs, with their squat trunks and their thick, leafless branches; the slender palms, straight and elegant, topped with their broad leaves; the parasol trees, spreading their dry-season foliage, a haven for animals, shepherds and farmers, and a resting-place for birds; the yellow, dry grass, broken at its roots; stumps of millet and maize stalks, indicating the boundaries of the ancient *lougans*; ghost-like trees, burnt by repeated bush fires. Beneath the torrid heat of the sun nature was covered with a thin layer of greyish dust, streaked by the rough tongue of the wind. The landscape was marked by a grandiose, calm austerity and harmony. (Sembene 1976, 62)

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repressed; and finally the third version refers to the pressure of the energy of desire, negatively coded in the structures of the unconscious, expressed through forms of substitutions, distortions, and symptoms (see Laplanche & Pontalis 1973; and Wollheim 1971). All three forms of Freudian repression can be seen as enacted in *Xala*; the ur-repression as El Hadji's crime in the past; the actual repression as embodied in the static present of El Hadji's world; and the return of the repressed as illustrated through the beggars entering the house of El Hadji.

<sup>23</sup> Outside of Dakar, that is, outside of El Hadji's world, the Mercedes is useless. Cars connect people in *Xala* but only in a superficial sense. The Mercedes is eventually taken away from El Hadji by automobile creditors, when he runs out of money. And *when* he runs out of money, things start to escalate in a string of causally related events (one of the few times in the novel a narrative causal chain seems to emerge); his business is ruined; he is expelled from the banks; his employees flee; and his family start to dismantle. When the money runs out, the faked spectacle of the dynamism and mobility of El Hadji's world equally starts to crack.

What the mobile El Hadji cannot reach, the novel seems to suggest, is a *repressed* space, a margin forgotten within the contemporised order of El Hadji's world. It is a timeless or anachronistic place, one that cannot be properly mapped, an unknown territory within which he becomes a stranger:

Then, as they emerged from a ravine, they saw conical thatched roofs, grey-black with weathering, standing out against the horizon in the middle of the empty plain. Free-ranging, skinny cattle with dangerous-looking horns fenced with one another to get at what little grass there was. No more than silhouettes in the distance, a few people were busy around the only well ... The village had neither shop nor school nor dispensary; there was nothing at all attractive about it in fact. It was life based on the principles of community interdependence. (64)<sup>24</sup>

Sereen Mada's barren and poor village is one that appears timeless, out of time, a space which cannot be reached by the temporality of El Hadji's world.<sup>25</sup> While El Hadji waits for Sereen Mada, he eventually falls asleep and when he wakes up 'with a start', he finds himself wrapped in 'complete darkness' (65); having lost his sense of time, blinded by the depthless darkness that has swallowed him, immobilised without the car, waiting in uncertainty for the marabout, El Hadji feels utterly estranged in the world of Sereen Mada, a world based on the principles of community interdependence. It is as if El Hadji wakes up in a world that belongs to a strange, distant, forgotten tense, a *past* tense – one that does not correlate with the world inhabited by El Hadji. Sereen Mada's world is one that exists

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<sup>24</sup> In 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', Fredric Jameson briefly analyses and discusses this passage in *Xala*, arguing that it illustrates that 'the space of a past and future utopia – a social world of collective cooperation – is dramatically inserted into the corrupt and westernized money economy of the new post-independence national or comprador bourgeoisie' (Jameson 1986, 81). Jameson argues that Ousmane Sembene, as a radical African writer, in the aftermath of independence, found himself in a dilemma; 'a passion for change and social regeneration which has not yet found its agents' (ibid.). This, Jameson adds, is 'also very much an aesthetic dilemma, a crisis of representation' (ibid.). What Jameson refers to is the problematic of representing the 'evils' of societies as, not foreign colonisers, but one's own people, which makes the connections and determinations 'much more difficult to represent' (ibid.).

<sup>25</sup> Yet it is also a 'harmonic', 'restful' and 'peaceful' place that stands in glaring contrast to El Hadji's desperate Dakar: 'An empty, cloudless sky. The torrid, stifling heat hung in the air. Clothes stuck to damp bodies. Everyone was returning to work after lunch, so the streets were very busy. Mopeds, bicycles and pedestrians streamed in the same direction towards the commercial centre of the city' (Sembene 1976, 32).



outside of the familiar sphere of El Hadji, but the irony is that El Hadji is precisely estranged in his *own* world, and that it is for this very reason that he takes pains to reach Sereen Mada's 'unattractive' world, because it is here that the main cause of his estrangement, the *xala*, may be resolved. Much of *Xala* tells the story of El Hadji trying desperately to be at *home* in a world that he himself, above all, has created, but in which he has become alienated because of the *xala*, for which reason he must find the cause of his homelessness. After he returns from Sereen Mada's village, Modu asks him where he should take him, and El Hadji all of a sudden realises that he has no proper home: 'he had three villas and three wives, but where was his real *home*?' (69). The *xala*, causing impotence, has literally made El Hadji homeless. Afraid of visiting his wives' villas, because of his sexual short-comings, El Hadji at one point visits a hotel, owned by a Syrian, who tells him: 'Here you are at home' (56). Significantly, at the Syrian's hotel, El Hadji falls asleep and later wakes up confused, having no sense of time, immobilised without the car – in a similar way as to when he later wakes up in Sereen Mada's hut. 'Sleep' here signifies reflective, static moments in the narrative, gaps that produce temporal loopholes in El Hadji's bourgeois life. El Hadji's 'unreal' experience at Sereen Mada's place is an experience of otherness, a reality utterly unrecognisable in the context of the naturalist bourgeois world of El Hadji.

Lukács's critique of naturalism as an ideologically coded narrative modality which attempts to *suspend* narrativity, to contemporise everything through a series of disconnected tableaux in the present, correlates with the reified, theatrical world inhabited by El Hadji and his business colleagues. As several critics have observed, *Xala* 'is written

in a naturalist genre' (Gugler & Diop 1998, 149), but often this is seen as a sign of the novel's *weakness*. Kenneth Harrow, for example, observes:

As a successful novelist, he [Ousmane Sembene] has learned to make skilful use of the oppressors' tools, but not in a revolutionary sense. The banal composition and trite polemics ... betray a tradition of naturalism that dates from Zola and that has scarcely improved on the original ... In the novel version of *Xala* the contradictions for Sembène are heightened by the fact that he must use French to identify those moments when his characters are supposed to be speaking in Wolof. But what he dares not do in the novel ... he triumphantly affirms in the film. (Harrow 1980, 183-184)<sup>26</sup>

Harrow's view reflects a general tendency in essays discussing *Xala* as a novel and as a film, namely the political and aesthetic preference for the latter. Initially, it is easy to see why; the film-version is sophisticated, complex and stylistically interesting in a number of ways, which, in comparison, puts the novelistic version's dreary, descriptive scenes, focalised entirely through the commodified world of El Hadji, in a rather unfavourable light. The *theatricality* – as an aesthetic codification of in-authenticity – of this world can, for obvious reasons, be explored and shown through the medium of the film in ways much more vivid and emphasised than through the form of the novel. But whereas the medium of the film has many advantages in relation to what *Xala* as an aesthetic-political project is concerned with (such as language, superficiality, commodification), the novel-version, I

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<sup>26</sup> Besides the issue of literary form in *Xala*, with which I am predominantly occupied, Harrow also raises the important issue of language in the novel; in the French-speaking world of El Hadji, the indigenous language of Wolof becomes a site of resistance, 'the weapon of struggle par excellence' (Harrow 1980, 182) against the invasion of foreign influence. Rama, El Hadji's eldest daughter, is a student activist politically involved in recuperating the language of Wolof, considering French 'An historical accident. Wolof is our national language' (Sembene 1976, 86). However, in the novel Rama does not represent, in an unambiguous way, a genuinely radical figure; despite her political commitment, her position is equally compromised, albeit in a more subtle way than El Hadji's position, and the bourgeois discourse to which he belongs. Significantly, in the novel she is hit twice by someone. The first time is when she fiercely criticises her father for marrying N'Gone, shouting that 'A polygamist is never frank' (13). El Hadji slaps her, retorting that 'You can be a revolutionary at the university or in the street but not in my house. Never!' (ibid.). Near the end of the novel, when the beggars have entered their house, Rama is filled with anger but 'Against whom? Against her father? Against these wretched people? She who was always ready with the words "revolution" and "new social order" felt deep within her breast something like a stone falling heavily into her heart, crushing her' (100-101). She slaps a beggar woman, who gets up and gives 'Rama a resounding slap' (103) in response. Whereas Rama was slapped the first time for being radical, she is slapped the second time for being reactionary, thus illustrating the ambiguities and complexities of maintaining a radically political identity.

would argue, is a more accomplished work, precisely because the form of the novel can, uniquely, unfold *Xala*'s overall *temporal* problematic, in a way that the film-version cannot. One of the fundamental differences, the young Lukács notes in *Theory of the Novel*, between the genre of the theatre or drama, and the genre of the novel is that the former 'does not know the concept of time: it is subject to the three unities and, provided these are properly understood, the unity of time signifies a state of being lifted out of the duration of time' (Lukács 2003, 121). The genre of the novel, given its flexible and expansive temporal schematic, is on the other hand according to Lukács *the* aesthetic genre of temporality in the modern world. In a sense, one could say that the novel-version of *Xala* mourns the fact that it cannot, in the end, be a theatre – an ideologically coded desire caught in the 'wrong' form – which of course is also precisely *why* the novelistic version of *Xala* is important as an aesthetic-political project. What I am arguing is *not* that *Xala* is a naturalist novel, in the Lukácsian sense, but rather that *Xala* as a novel portrays, in explicit ways, a world ideologically inscribed in the naturalist modality, in the Lukácsian sense.

This difference is important to maintain, insofar as we are to understand and grasp the temporal configuration of the *margins* of El Hadji's naturalist world. If we say that El Hadji's world is cloaked in naturalist ideology – a world suspending narratability – how should we understand Sereen Mada's marginal world, which, to an even larger extent, is portrayed as still life? 'Still life', the art historian Norman Bryson writes, 'is the world minus its narratives ... the world minus its capacity for generating narrative interest' (Bryson 2001, 60). Still life presents a narrative robbed of its narrative, in which the 'subject is not only exiled physically: the scale of values on which narrative is based is erased also' (61). The world of Sereen Mada, based on the principles of community

interdependence, is wholly unattractive to El Hadji because it appears as static, arrested, without narrative, without the capacity for generating narrative interest. It is a world of boredom, a temporally anachronistic world, robbed of its narrative.<sup>27</sup>

What *haunts* El Hadji throughout the story and eventually punctures his world is at the same time the failure of this naturalist ideology to *repress* its margin, its subtext, despite the energetic attempts to deform and dehumanise it – *as* still life, or as a lifeless, objectified world. Thus, we have a world represented through a naturalist modality, whose ‘inevitability’ follows as a consequence of the nationalist bourgeoisie’s betrayal of their past, radical ideals in the present; a present which they, El Hadji and his business colleagues, do not want to understand as anything but unchanging and permanent. This ‘betrayal’ of the past is however conditioned by the repression or re-writing of the present’s margin, or subtext, which, in the ideologically coded spectacle of the present, emerges as

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<sup>27</sup> The objectified world of Sereen Mada is one that, according to El Hadji is unattractive, a world without interest, a place of boredom. At the same time, Sereen Mada’s world is also one that indirectly constitutes an accusation against El Hadji and his class; what he, as a radical national bourgeois representative *should* have done for his country, and what he has not done. One might understand this ideological codification of boredom via Fredric Jameson’s essay ‘Beyond the Cave’ from 1975, in which he employs Lukács’s analysis of ‘reification’, the process of ideological disconnection, fetishisation, dislocation and displacement, to illuminate the ‘conceptual limitations on our aesthetic thinking and our taste and judgments’ (Jameson 1989b, 117). Qualifying Lukács’s notion of reification by comparing it to Freud’s concept of ‘repression’, Jameson argues that one may see western capitalism from an overall point of view as a system of representation employing a method which ‘is not so much an affair of distortion and of false consciousness in the sense of outright cynicism or lies ... but rather, primarily and constitutively, of leaving out, of strategic omissions, lapses, a kind of careful preliminary preparation of the raw material such that certain questions will never arise in the first place’ (118-119). ‘Repression’, Jameson writes, ‘is reflexive, that is, it aims not only at removing a particular object from consciousness, but also and above all, at doing away with the traces of that removal as well, at repressing the very memory of the intent to repress’ (118). The questions that never arise in the first place are related to aspects which people keep ignoring, forgetting, criticising negatively, devaluing – and thus, perhaps, finding boring. The notion of ‘boredom’ must thus be seen within an ideological perspective: ‘it marks the spot where something painful is buried, it invites us to reawaken all the anguished hesitation’ (ibid.). To Jameson, this hesitation, or, in its coded, symptomatic form as boredom, is closely related to aspects alien to a given culture, the margins of otherness, signalling the reaching of an ethical, self-reflexive border: ‘Not interest or fascination, therefore, but rather that sense of dreariness with which we come to the end of our own world and observe with a certain self-protective lassitude that there is nothing for us on the other side of the boundary’ (ibid.). In comparison to Sereen Mada’s ideologically coded ‘boring’ world, El Hadji’s world is one that appears as a theatre because it contemporises everything; because it cannot allow the past, in its truthful form, to play any significant role. Hence, everything that appears in and for this world is inevitably contemporised, de-historicised – or boring.

still life, but only because it has been radically de-narrativised, robbed of its narrative, in a present that cannot allow alternative narratives to disrupt its contemporised and a-historical narrative codification.

If the otherness of Sereen Mada's world is basically one that appears as a still life, a distant, strange and anachronistic place – a forgotten, past tense – it is also one that possesses the power to transform the world of El Hadji; that is to say, Sereen Mada's past world is precisely a world that may be seen as incorporating a forgotten past in El Hadji's world of 'homogeneous, empty time', and, as such, introduce a qualitative, temporal dimension. Because Sereen Mada's world is essentially not *part* of El Hadji's theatrical world, because it appears – in relation to El Hadji's world – as de-narrativised, as still life, it also embodies an uncanny, allegorical margin, in the Freudian sense; an objectified margin that suddenly is given an independent, ghostly life, a de-narrativised narrative suddenly narrating its own narrative, different from the narrative of El Hadji. Sereen Mada's world, a world in which El Hadji's *xala* may be cured, is one of the subtexts, the cracks, coming to life in *Xala*, one that remains stubbornly resistant to being integrated in El Hadji's narrative, precisely because the latter's narrative cannot afford to incorporate it in anything but a repressed form, a subtext. What gives life – and indeed potency – to this subtext is of course El Hadji's curse, his impotence, the uncanny *xala*.

### **The Return of the Repressed**

From an overall point of view, *Xala* as a work of literature is of course rather distant from the uncanny tales Freud had in mind; indeed, its grotesque, exaggerated portrayal of the hapless unravelling of the character of El Hadji seems to be inscribed in the genre of

political satire. However, the novel's inscription in a satiric modality is also one that is ambiguous, limited to the bourgeois world of El Hadji; but whereas to the readers, as well as to many of the characters in the novel, the *xala* takes on a comic dimension, the margins of El Hadji's bourgeois world seem to be marked by an altogether more solemn and bleak tonality.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the *xala* remains an utterly uncanny experience to El Hadji himself:

He aged overnight. Two deep lines starting at the top of the nostrils curved around his mouth, widening as they did so. His chin broadened. The lack of sleep showed at the edge of his eyelids and bathed his eyes in a reddish lustre crossed by threads ... A dense cloud took possession of his thoughts. Everything seemed to shake unsteadily. A skein of questions unwound itself in an endless thread through his mind. (Sembene 1976, 39)

If El Hadji feels estranged when confronted with the *other* reality of Sereen Mada's marginal world, located outside the city, there are cracks in El Hadji's theatrical world already from the very beginning of the novel – similarly portrayed as still life – namely the beggars. We are told that El Hadji is 'raging against the beggar' (28), who chants continuously in the background of many of the novel's various scenes: 'The beggar was part of the décor like the dirty walls and the ancient lorries delivering goods. He was well-known in the street ... He seemed attached to it' (27).

The beggars, who, as the novel explicitly informs us, were not beggars in the past,<sup>29</sup> are in a very literal sense the repressed of history, El Hadji's history, a history of which they no longer play any part, except in the form of dehumanised, reified still life objects. That is to say, they embody the garbage leftover after history has run its course: a

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<sup>28</sup> The satiric dimension of *Xala* is also something Fredric Jameson takes up in his discussion of the novel in the essay 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism'. Relying on the works of Robert C. Elliott, Jameson observes that 'All satire ... necessarily carries a utopian frame of reference within itself; all utopias, no matter how serene or disembodied, are driven secretly by the satirist's rage at a fallen reality' (Jameson 1986, 80).

<sup>29</sup> Such as for example one of the beggars who shouts: 'I'll never be a man. Someone like yourself knocked me down with his car. He drove off, leaving me lying there' (Sembene 1976, 100). The beggar is shouting at El Hadji, but his tragic fate also puts the politically radical character of Rama, standing next to El Hadji, in an uncomfortable position; earlier, we were told that she 'loved speed. At a pedestrian crossing she just missed someone and skidded towards the pavement' (43).

‘procession of lame and blind people, lepers, legless cripples, one-legged cripples, men, women, and children ... There was something repulsive about the procession, which gave off a fetid smell of ragged clothes’ (97). If the gap between El Hadji’s world and its margins (Sereen Mada’s past world and the still life presence of the beggars) is one that is repressed, the experience of the xala is unsettling to El Hadji precisely because he is forced to *confront* it, to *cross* this gap, if he wants to be cured from his impotence – or, in the end, allow the beggars to cross his police-protected doorstep.<sup>30</sup> It is a crossing which moreover suggests that the xala embodies a principle that participates simultaneously in several, mutually irreconcilable, narrative modalities that, ideologically, are in conflict. In the narrative economy of the novel, the xala represents an ambiguous and undecidable figure, partly because it participates in different narrative modalities simultaneously (hence its unreality or un-canniness, a Freudian betrayal of common sense), and partly because it constitutes a novelistic-symbolic configuration of the non-configurative – of otherness as a form of truth that is formulated within one, unified narrative frame.

As a superstitious power, whose reality in an uncanny way is forced upon El Hadji, the xala seems to embody an absent cause, only manifest in its effects (that is, a superstitious, ghostly power causing impotence, allegorically illustrating the impotence of the national bourgeoisie), which becomes manifest only near the end of the novel, when the chanting beggar claims to be the ‘author’ of the xala: ‘I can tell you now, it was I who

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<sup>30</sup> Although it remains uncertain as to whether the beggars are allowed to return to the streets, as the novel’s last sentence reads: ‘Outside the forces of order raised their weapons into the firing position’ (Sembene 1976, 103). To Gugler and Diop, this ending seems to undermine the novel’s revolutionary potential: ‘If the wretched of the earth ... can curse and cleanse, are they a political force to be reckoned with? The novel seems to preclude such a revolutionary prospect as the police outside the house raise their weapons into firing position at the end’ (Gugler & Diop 1998, 151). One should, however, be careful not to put too much emphasis on the novel’s (lack of) revolutionary potential, because this would undoubtedly also lead to rather one-dimensional readings of the overall aesthetic-political project of Sembene’s work of fiction, which, as I have attempted to show, also explores and traces the mechanisms by which revolutionary potentials are formulated in the first place.

caused your *xala*' (101). But what endows the beggar, at this particular moment in El Hadji's life (and the life of the national bourgeoisie), with such a causal power?

What essentially endows the beggar with power over El Hadji, at this particular moment in his life, is the event of the wedding night by which El Hadji attempts to *seal off* the past, *inscribe* himself in the future (by marrying the young N'Gone), as well as being *elevated* 'to the rank of the traditional notability; it represented a kind of promotion' (4), thus echoing, at a private-individual level, the celebration of the election of the president of the chamber of commerce, which is supposed to mark a radical, new beginning. If the wedding night, during which the *xala* occurs for the first time, constitutes a fixation of failure – that is, the symbolic power invested in the spectacle of the wedding unveiled as being fundamentally impotent – much of the novel seems occupied with coming to terms with the reality of this failure; El Hadji searches for people who can cure him; he suspects people who might have caused the *xala*. Indeed, the search for the cause of an effect (the impotence of the present situation) lies at the centre of the novel's narrative dynamic.

During El Hadji's desperate search for a cure, he maintains a high living standard: 'three villas, several cars, his wives, children, servants and employees. Accustomed to settling everything by cheque, he continued to pay his accounts and his household expenses in this way. He went on spending. Soon his liabilities outstripped his credit' (47). In *Xala*, the circulation is dead – a false dynamic which, inevitably it seems, collapses.

At the heart of this false dynamic, we see a tightly woven pattern of sexual and economic relations. When El Hadji begins to suffer from impotence, he spends all his time trying to find a cure while neglecting his business. When he is cured by Sereen Mada, albeit only temporarily, he is no longer able to save his business – and hence pay the marabout



who has cured him (and who consequently restores the xala). A strange, inverted logic is at stake here; initially, El Hadji's sexual impotence – as caused by the xala – seems to lead to economic impotence (El Hadji's business is ruined because he is entirely focused on finding a cure). But as we know, the xala itself is empowered as a causal force of impotence *because* of El Hadji's corrupt business methods – the fact that his wealth has *not* been achieved legally, or properly, that is, via a proper, capitalist circulation, but rather through plain theft.

In this sense, the xala becomes powerful, or meaningful, as a cause of impotence only in a *negative* sense, that is, as an incomprehensibility, a gap, which cannot be solved within the false dynamic of El Hadji's world. Finding a cure, which is what El Hadji is trying to do for much of the novel, thus remains a futile, impotent effort. The novel ends with the beggar claiming the 'authorship' of the xala, but only after El Hadji painstakingly has traversed through all other (false) options first, and in the process ruined himself financially, as if the novel suggests that it is only when El Hadji can no longer pay his way out of reality, that reality is able to force itself upon him.<sup>31</sup> Disempowered, El Hadji has run out of options, credit and credibility, when the beggar approaches him; that is, El Hadji has *worked through* a series of misrecognitions as if to prepare for the true, and truly remembered, form of recognition.

As a negative cause – a gap or incomprehensibility – the xala is at the same time not really a proper, absolute cause at all, but must, in turn, be seen as an effect caused by some preceding cause; the paradox here is of course that this preceding cause is precisely El

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<sup>31</sup> As such, the novel moreover suggests that the actual fetish, the real superstition, is money, both in the Marxist sense – as concealing the true social totality – as well as in the Freudian sense – as concealing lack. It is only when El Hadji is no longer in a position to buy a cure for money, that he in fact is offered a genuine form of cure - curing his lack, as well as curing his ideologically coded blindness (for a discussion of the differences between the Marxist fetish and Freudian fetish, see Žižek 1992, 49).

Hadji himself – the corrupt businessman who robbed and tortured his way to wealth and power in the past. One may also see this as the novel's way of suggesting that the sexual impotence, as presumably caused by the beggar's xala, is precisely *not* caused; that the xala is not a cause but rather the effect of a repressed reality returning – a xala which is fuelled with power *because* it is not a cause but must be interpreted as an effect that returns – to its empowering source, the cause.<sup>32</sup> The beggar does not in fact *cure* anything (or at least the novel does not clarify this issue in an explicit way); rather, as it is, the beggar merely seems to *confirm* that the xala, as a cause of impotence, is a figure of power because it embodies the negative effect of a criminal event of the past – the crime of the past (or, on an overall level, the crime against the past itself) which El Hadji cannot *afford* to remember – embodied in the very fate of the beggars *as* beggars in or of the present.

El Hadji's amnesia is ideologically coded as a way of emptying the present of the memory of a criminal past that precisely has made possible El Hadji's wealth and powerful position in the present. In *Xala*, the more El Hadji becomes immersed in the task of finding a cure, the more he forgets the immediate concerns around him, such as his family, the business, and himself, which fatally leads to his expulsion from the lucrative business collective, at which point he, as a consequence of his forgetting the present, remembers the radical ideals of his past. Amnesia is also embodied in the narrative principle of *Xala*; the

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<sup>32</sup> In terms of the novelistic dynamic as formulated by the early Lukács in *Theory of the Novel*, what is significant about *Xala*'s narrative dynamic is that it interprets the impact of hidden causal forces upon a present that for ideological reasons has repressed those forces. As a *cause*, the xala is unable to manifest itself except as a negative effect, that is, impotence, in El Hadji's world, which in effect causes El Hadji to search for its cause, and which eventually turns out to be his own repressed past. Searching for this cause, El Hadji at the same time apparently sets in motion other, negative, causal forces; for example, he is expelled from the group of businessmen because, as the president tells him, 'Your colleagues want to stop the rather serious prejudice you are causing them' (Sembene 1976, 77). Significantly, when El Hadji defends himself by referring to the xala as the cause of his neglect, no one at this stage seems to accept this as a proper reason, that is, at this level the power of the xala as a cause has no validity. The causal principle in *Xala* remains abstract, controlled or legitimised through interpretive measures which are dependent on particular, ideological, concerns; time, in the Lukácsian sense, becomes the corrupting principle that disturbs this abstract-ideological causal principle, by introducing or inserting a past that has been repressed.

unfolding of the plot has, as mentioned, no real coherence – it cannot configure coherence as a meaningful narrative dynamic within one frame. Events unfold, one by one, in between which the meaning of previous events emerge dissonantly. It is as if *Xala* constitutes a narrative – conceived as a false, naturalist modality – that attempts to cure itself of its amnesia, an amnesia that has become so comprehensive and powerful at this stage that even the memory of its own ideologically coded amnesia seems to have been forgotten as well.

The beggars' return is a return of the real. It constitutes their interpretive-utopian, narrative claim, as the real effects 'organically' linked to the true cause, El Hadji himself – not the invented, theatrical El Hadji of the present, but the criminal, neo-colonial capitalist, the one who betrays the past; and, as such, the one who is identifiable only within a narrative frame that includes the past.<sup>33</sup> The beggars' return is a narrative claim to tell their story, which is also El Hadji's true story – an uncanny desire to reclaim a collective, realist narrative in an unreal, de-narrativised, and split world.

### Negative Realism

*Xala*'s split world deals explicitly with what I initially referred to as the problematic of imitateness, which also is a problematic reflecting the difficulties of finding a form that may contain and formulate truth, in a non-ironic sense – difficulties in particular enlarged as well as illuminated by the ideological concerns of the national bourgeoisie. 'The colonialist', El Hadji hypocritically reproaches his business colleagues when he is about to be expelled from their lucrative, but politically compromised, collective, 'is stronger, more

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<sup>33</sup> El Hadji is, in a figurative sense, a man wilfully blind to the injustices of his acts. A marabout tells him that the one who has caused the xala is someone close to him; throughout the novel, El Hadji suspects everyone for having caused his impotence, yet in the end it turns out that he himself is the guilty one, in a way similar to the tragic figure of Oedipus (see Jonathan Culler's reading of the Oedipus-myth in *The Pursuit of Signs*; 192-196).

powerful than ever before, hidden inside us, here in this very place' (84). As a novel, *Xala* develops a utopian-interpretive perspective to trace and explore the hidden ways in which truth becomes radically undermined as well as to trace and explore forms in which it can be contained.

Exploring disjointed connections, which can only be reconnected negatively, through the narrative principle embodied symbolically in the dimension of the *xala*, the uncanny, secretive novelistic dynamic of *Xala* unites or brings together different narrative constellations, mutually cancelling each other out, in an effort to demarcate, negatively, the absence of the form of truth. In the novel, the two main scenes – the wedding night and the beggars' humiliation of El Hadji – are inserted within one narrative frame, despite being temporally displaced and thematically or realistically disconnected, as two mutually irreconcilable, yet equally mutually conditioning, events, configuring, in an overall sense, a break that reverberates as the haunting spectacle of Senegalese post-independence history itself.<sup>34</sup>

The margins, or subtext, of El Hadji's world introduce an *other* reality – a different, allegorical codification, independent from the main narrative; a qualitative, temporal difference, which splinters the present, or rather splinters the *in-authenticity* of a present that is dominated by a temporal modality similar to what Walter Benjamin calls 'homogeneous, empty time'. Benjamin's contrasting concept to the 'homogeneous, empty time' is 'Jetztzeit' (Benjamin 1999, 253), a qualitative concept of time conveying the sense of 'discontinuity', as opposed to the faked spectacle of continuity embodied in homogeneous, empty time (underlying the naturalist modality). 'Jetztzeit' is marked by a

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<sup>34</sup> That is, the haunting spectacle as embodied in the problematic of imitateness; the sense of being a paradoxical *effect* in search of an absent cause that may authorise a legitimate, proper *beginning*, independent of the scars of the colonial past.

messianic topography, similar to the threshold, the arcade, or the work of translation, that is, instances at which the past and future meet and condition one another; a *de-reifying* force through which, Benjamin argues, a qualitative temporal experience can be glimpsed. The subtext of El Hadji's world can be seen as constituting moments of what Benjamin calls 'Jetztzeit', breaking the homogeneous, empty time of El Hadji's world;<sup>35</sup> it is a subtext that introduces the basis of a sense of history, as dynamic, narrativisable, representable. In *Xala*, this basis remains a utopian ideal, to be achieved in and through time – indeed *healed* through time – an ideal that negatively measures the in-authenticity of the present.

*Xala's* problematic points at certain epistemological questions about the *potential* of novelistic, or aesthetic, representation within a particular, historical situation, of which *Xala* is both the symptom as well as its symbolic resolution, its 'working-through', at an aesthetic level. The return of the repressed, as a real effect, constitutes a figure of negation – a dimension of absence in the present, indeed the *impotence* of the present. One might see this as the novel's way of configuring a discourse of power that cannot *realistically* exist within the frames of the ideologically coded reality of the present, cannot be given any reality – except in a configured way, as the beggars' superstitious power, which of course is not a power of superstition at all, but rather a negative, moral-transcendent power, emerging, like a wish fulfilment, in a world wherein such a transcendent power ideologically has been eliminated. The narrative strategy in *Xala* can be seen as one that strives toward a certain constellation at which different trajectories are brought together – a *realist* ideal, in the Lukácsian sense, albeit one that remains situated within a highly

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<sup>35</sup> Throughout the novel, the beggar chants in the background of many scenes, for example in front of El Hadji's business, outside Oumi's villa, and near N'Gone's villa. When El Hadji visits Sereen Mada's distant villa, out of the beggar's reach, he is, temporarily, cured for his xala. The beggar's music seems to introduce a different temporal modality in El Hadji's world, similar to Benjamin's 'Jetztzeit', breaking the deafening continuity of homogeneous, empty time that pervades all life in the city.

allegorical framework, which measures, negatively, the gap between its own formal-representative conditions and the ideals for which these conditions themselves have been measured (thus confirming the later Lukács's thesis of the necessity of the *repetitive* dimension of critical realism, while equally confirming the earlier Lukács's argument that this dimension essentially must remain an *ideal* rather than a *norm*). This realist ideal, which *Xala* as a novel traces negatively through its melancholic, utopian-interpretive dynamic, constitutes a level on which everything correlates within a unified framework of meaning; on which a collective form of meaning may be understood spontaneously across disjointed levels; and, as such, a level upon which a 'working through' of the truth can be symbolically re-enacted.

## Chapter Five

### Arcades of Foreignness: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*

#### Writing Back to the Centre and the Question of Canonicity

As we have seen, Ousmane Sembene's novel *Xala* explored the continued forms of colonial modes of exploitation in the aftermath of independence, in order to criticise the national bourgeoisie's ideological use of nationalism as a rhetorical tool serving its own class interests. Within the field of postcolonial studies, one of the problems with *Xala*, as I mentioned earlier, is the novel's alleged use of a western 'naturalist' form, which is probably also one of the main reasons why most postcolonial critics have preferred the *film*-version of *Xala*, rather than the *novel*-version. To put it in a crude way, *Xala* as a novel quite simply does not seem resistant enough in an aesthetic-formal way – not distanced enough from what it supposedly criticises and interrogates politically. My reading of *Xala* attempted to stress a different angle from which one might avoid reading the text within this particular framework, and instead focus on what I saw as *Xala*'s novelistic potential as

social critique. In the following, however, I want to explore some of the mechanisms through which postcolonial studies has attempted to renegotiate – through the dimension of the aesthetic – what I have called the problematic of imitativeness (that is, the hegemonic influence of western forms and techniques) in ways more explicitly distanced from hegemonic discourse.

If a novel like *Xala* on the one hand criticised continued forms of colonial exploitation, while on the other hand allegedly continued using oppressive and complicit western aesthetic forms, another way of (dis)solving the problematic of imitativeness, as Roberto Schwarz observes in *Misplaced Ideas*, would be to *reverse* the direction of that influence; to deconstruct the hierarchical notion of the copy, as always somehow being inferior to the original – the posterior to the prior – as well as the peripheral to the centre.<sup>1</sup>

What Roberto Schwarz refers to is of course the notion of ‘writing back to the centre’, a highly influential concept originally coined by Salman Rushdie, who argued that English as a language needed to be ‘decolonised’.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the notion was crystallised and popularised in *The Empire Writes Back*, a book which epitomises one of the ways in which much postcolonial criticism has dealt with the problematic of imitativeness at an aesthetic-formal level. From merely being ‘imitative’ texts, or texts evaluated in the shadow of a foreign aesthetic framework whose meaning and function remained disconnected from local concerns, the poetics of ‘writing back to the centre’ added a renewed radical dimension to postcolonial cultural concerns. Strategies of writing back to the centre, at least in theory, would boost the self-esteem of subjectivities of the margin, moving from being considered as backwards, passive, derived, secondary, belated,

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<sup>1</sup> See Schwarz (1992); 9

<sup>2</sup> See *The Empire Writes Back* (2002); 32



translated, and imitative, to being part of a larger process of radical re-thinking and re-organisation of modernity – not the westernisation of the world, but the creolization and hybridisation of the global discourse.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of writing back to the centre gave the critical dynamic and methodology of postcolonial studies a utopian aura of radicality, subverting experiences of secondariness in creative and counter-discursive ways, as mimicry and pastiche, and thus apparently re-vitalising a tired, exhausted Europe while at the same time generating renewed hope for the preservation of an assumed, anti-essentialised local identity performed on the global stage. A literary key text within this perspective is J.M. Coetzee's novel *Foe* (published in 1986), which writes back to the centre in a conspicuous and explicit way, while also framing, directly and indirectly, the question of institutionalisation – and, by implication, the question of *canonicity*. Canonicity is of course a particularly sensitive issue within the field of postcolonial studies, since a large part of the *ethos* of

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<sup>3</sup> Here I follow closely Roberto Schwarz who, within the context of Latin America, writes: 'We would pass from being a backward to an advanced part of the world, from a deviation to a paradigm, from inferior to superior lands (although the analysis set out to suppress just such superiority). All this because countries which live in the humiliation of having to imitate are more willing than the metropolitan countries to give up the illusion of an original source, even though the theory originated there and not here. Above all, the problem of mirror-culture would no longer be ours alone, and instead of setting our sights on the Europeanization or Americanization of Latin America we would, in a certain sense, be participating in the Latin Americanization of the central cultures' (Schwarz 1992, 6). Such a perspective certainly explains *why* the popularity of a notion like 'writing back to the centre' has become one of the dominating tropes in much postcolonial criticism. One thing is, however, a *theory* of dismantling; yet another thing, Schwarz insists, is 'whether this conceptual break with the primacy of origins would enable us to balance out or combat relations of actual subordination' (ibid.). That western, innovative models are being dismantled as originals, does not automatically imply that they also lose their force of actuality within the concrete, material situation; and since the problematic of imitativeness according to Schwarz is 'essentially practical in character' (7), that is to say, non-western countries reproduce certain western models in order to come to terms with concrete, practical problems, 'in response to cultural, economic and political needs' (ibid.), the idea of deconstructing the original is misleading or *misplaced*, because it seems to suggest that the problematic of imitativeness is the actual problem *as such*, and that it can be 'solved' through the reversal of the original-copy model. If the problematic of imitativeness is not subverted or radically challenged by reverting cause and effect beyond a purely imaginative level, and thus in fact legitimising status quo, it reveals, according to Schwarz, a deeper symptomatic of objective contradictions that still persist.

postcolonial criticism has precisely been to formulate a challenge to a narrow, Eurocentric literary canon based on allegedly universal values.<sup>4</sup>

As a complex, fictive reworking of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (published in 1719), *Foe* frames the issue of canonicity in a direct way by 'writing back' to one of the most canonised texts in western culture.<sup>5</sup> Yet in an indirect way, *Foe* has also become an exemplary, canonised text itself, one of the most cited texts within postcolonial studies. This of course raises the question as to whether *Foe*, even if it challenges the western canon, itself reproduces or promotes mechanisms by which canonicity as such functions. The latter seems to be an increasingly relevant issue in the light of what I have referred to as postcolonial melancholia, the unease about the field's possible complicity with the processes of global commodification of otherness and marginality in the market place.<sup>6</sup>

Having successfully dismantled and destabilised the traditional canon, the success of postcolonial studies has, as I have argued, to some extent itself become a problem, in the

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<sup>4</sup> The fact that many literary texts coming from former western colonies to a large extent used (and still use) metropolitan language as well as forms, techniques and so forth, also meant that they initially were often evaluated in relation to English canonical literature. A.N. Jeffares, for example, argues in a paper from 1965 that the commonwealth writer 'wants ultimately to be judged not because he [*sic*] gives us a picture of life in a particular place, in a particular situation, but by the universal, lasting quality of his writing, judged by neither local nor yet national standards. Good writing is something which transcends borders, whether local or national, whether of the mind or of the spirit' (Jeffares 1966, xviii; I quote here from John McLeod's *Beginning Postcolonialism*; 14). Retrospectively, it is easy to see the problems involved in such an a-historical and Eurocentric view of literary value, and also to imagine how a notion like 'writing back to the centre' in a much more vigorous and active way emerges as a basic trope which allows literary critics to read postcolonial literary texts in terms of a relation involving challenge, deformation, and subversion.

<sup>5</sup> See Tiffin (1997) and Thieme (2001) for discussions of *Foe*'s 'writing back' to the canon.

<sup>6</sup> For a critical discussion of *Foe* as a canonised postcolonial text, see Derek Attridge (2004b); 65-90. Attridge is aware of the dangers of Coetzee's text being increasingly canonised, and thus essentially becoming a text that reinforces what it originally sets out to criticise; yet, according to Attridge, this is precisely the 'double bind dramatized in *Foe* at the level of the individual, and inherent in any attempt to combat political and cultural repression' (Attridge 2004b, 89). Within this perspective, *Foe* may even be seen as a utopian text, attempting to transform the concept of the canon as such, offering a cultural practice that encourages 'an awareness of the historical production of value, of the part played by ideological systems in political domination and exclusion, of the necessarily provisional and historically contestable nature of any arrangement which allows some to speak and in that gesture renders others – and a part of themselves – silent' (90). On the other hand, due to the increased sense of institutionalisation and academic commodification within the field of postcolonial studies in recent years, one might also argue that such a perspective would demand further inquiry. Besides, is the 'attempt to transform the concept of the canon' not also a particular characteristic of almost any texts in the western canon as well?

sense that it has increasingly become an institutionalised, authoritative field, operating with a narrow, fixed vocabulary, repeatedly employed in discussions of specific canonised texts that allegedly unfold, and thus confirm, the claims proposed by postcolonial studies as a theoretical field. Among those texts, *Foe*, along with Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, must be considered as one of postcolonial studies' key texts, perhaps *the* text of 'writing back to the centre'.

There is something manifesto-like about the way in which criticisms have approached *Foe*, as an exemplary postcolonial text, a text which apparently formulates postcolonial studies' aims and values in a mirror-like way. Reading critical responses to *Foe*, one finds a remarkably harmonic pattern of opinions and arguments, generally supported by a narrow theoretical set of orthodoxies and dogmas; very few critics actually question or criticise in a negative way the text's qualities as a subversive project.<sup>7</sup> There is of course nothing 'wrong' or 'suspicious' about that *as such*, but given the contemporary field's anxiety about the loss of radicality and questions of institutionalisation, the *relationship* between a canonised text like *Foe* and postcolonial studies as an increasingly institutionalised field, would seem to demand further critical investigation.

To reiterate my argument from the previous chapters, literary criticism may with a text like J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* also become exposed to a certain hermeneutical blindness – or what Franco Moretti calls an 'interpretive vicious circle' – whereby the critical discourse of postcolonial studies prescribes specific aims and values that must be confirmed and echoed in selected, canonised literary texts, for example Coetzee's *Foe*; texts which in order to be

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<sup>7</sup> For critical assessments of Coetzee's writing and *Foe* in particular, see Benita Parry's essay 'Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee', in which she argues that there are signs in Coetzee's fictions of an 'urge to cast off worldly attachments' (Parry 1996, 44). See also Kirsten Holst Petersen's sceptical essay 'An Elaborate Dead End? A Feminist Reading of Coetzee's *Foe*'. Those two essays in particular have equally been refuted and criticised in turn many times by adherents of Coetzee's style.

‘heard’, must conform to these claims, while, on the other hand, non-canonised texts are implicitly devalued, ignored or perhaps even demonised. In the following, I will attempt to reconstruct closely the narrative dynamic that *Foe* enacts, in order to frame what I see as the novel’s complex relationship with the discursive framework of postcolonial theory, and the particularly literary problematics this relationship may involve.

### **Literalness and Irony**

*Robinson Crusoe*, the ‘Father’ of the English novel, echoes throughout *Foe* in an oblique, yet always apparent way. Written at a time when western capitalism had long been embedded in the process of developing into a complex, imperial system of overseas exploitation, *Robinson Crusoe* embodies the nostalgic dream of a new beginning, or a beginning all over again, in a simpler, more transparent, capitalist society in which the individual middle-class artisan could still determine his own fate through hard, honest work.<sup>8</sup>

A text about new beginnings, or beginning again, there is an impatience scurrying along Defoe’s sentences, a rough, unpolished style that gives the novel a certain kind of transparency or immediacy, which has often been seen as one of the first examples of literary realism; one that is evoked by the everyday-like level of the novel’s laconic language, fused with carelessly long reportages of mundane, practical things, as well as non-literary, factual discourses on economics, trade, crafts, and geography that are never fully integrated in the plot of the story itself.<sup>9</sup> In an essay on *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee has

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<sup>8</sup> See Terry Eagleton (2005); 25 & 40

<sup>9</sup> See Watt (1977); Hulme (1992); and Eagleton (2005) for discussions of *Robinson Crusoe*’s literary realism. To clarify, *Robinson Crusoe*’s realism is of course very far from the kind of critical realism Lukács had in

described this style as ‘a matter of pure writerly attentiveness, pure submission to the exigencies of a world which, through being submitted to in a state so close to spiritual absorption, becomes transfigured, real’ (Coetzee 2001, 20).<sup>10</sup>

In one sense, the language of *Foe* is strikingly crystalline and lucid, which preserves much of the atmosphere of Defoe’s transparent style. On another level, it is a text bristling with an ironic force always threatening to explode its fictional frame. One might even say that it is precisely its apparent lack of irony which constitutes the greatest ironic force in the novel. It is a novel that insists on being read literally or transparently, *not* as an allegorical text, a text figuratively subverting its predecessor through irony. Yet, the more one reads it literally, the more ghostly it appears, as a text almost entirely consisting of material other than itself, other than its actual story – that is to say, a story materialising itself literally to the extent that it almost vanishes.<sup>11</sup> As a novel, *Foe* not only engages with otherness on the level of the story, but also in a very literal sense *is* other to itself. Much of the text in Coetzee’s novel is framed by quotation marks,<sup>12</sup> such as the first chapter which later turns out to be a manuscript. Another chapter consists of a series of letters addressed to the elusive writer Mr. Foe, while the actual diegetic level in the story consists of a dense, dream-like, inter-textual web of semi-meta-fictive reflections on an imaginary narrative, a

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mind; rather, as Hulme has argued, Defoe’s text is more an example of ‘surface realism’ (Hulme 1992, 176) – that is, a colonial romance or myth.

<sup>10</sup> Coetzee’s view of Daniel Defoe as a writer of purity, a writer of a ‘real’ language devoid of irony, is particularly interesting to bear in mind when we read his novel *Foe* whose relationship to its predecessor, as I mentioned earlier, is often seen by many postcolonial critics as one primarily involving a negative, ironic critique, a ‘writing back’. Coetzee himself, however, has expressed the hope that *Foe* will not merely be ‘read like pastiche’, but also ‘a tribute of sorts to eighteenth-century English prose style’ (Attwell 1992, 146).

<sup>11</sup> Derek Attridge has pointed out that ‘the larger part of the novel consists of a memoir and several letters written by the newly returned castaway Susan Barton to the well-known author Daniel Foe, quotation marks before each of her paragraphs reminding us constantly that this is not the mysterious immaterial language most fiction uses as its medium, nor even a representation of speech, but a representation *in writing of writing*’ (Attridge 2004b, 73).

<sup>12</sup> Gayatri Spivak observes: ‘Susan Barton begins the novel with quotation marks, a self-citation ... At the beginning of the text is a quotation with no fixed origin’ (Spivak 1991, 162).

narrative that is about to be written. It is as if *Foe* as a story never quite begins – as if it remains a long, ghostly prelude to another narrative that echoes in a strangely disembodied way through the text; a story that it can never quite become.

Read literally, then, *Foe* becomes a story about its own inability to become a story, a ghostly musing on the circumstances *before* Defoe's famous castaway-story has been written, the story of its genesis or pre-text, the imaginary primary scene of one of the founding texts in the western canon. Yet, read literally, *Foe* at the same time becomes ironic precisely to the extent that the reader is unable to read it in a pure sense, but only as an already mediated text filtered through Defoe's shadowing text. *Foe* becomes a negative narrative, writing the ghostly absences, exclusions and silences of everything that did not eventually become part of the 'official' story as everyone knows it – of everything that was different from a text like *Robinson Crusoe* which famously claimed its authenticity from a wholly different source.<sup>13</sup>

### **Narrative Silences and Mysteries**

*Foe* is mainly told from the I-narrator Susan Barton's perspective. It begins with the text of her rudimentary and provisional memoir from Crusoe's island, written down after she and Friday have arrived in England, explicitly addressed to the author Mr. Foe whom she has asked to write her story.

The memoir begins, literally, from the beginning, that is, from the time she arrives on the island: 'At last I could row no further ... I slipped overboard ... I swam towards the strange island' (Coetzee 1987, 5). Throughout her account, she stresses the *difference* between the island she encounters, and what readers may expect: 'For readers reared on

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<sup>13</sup> See Angus Ross' introduction to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1985); 7-21

travellers' tales, the words *desert isle* may conjure up a place of soft sands and shady trees ... But the island on which I was cast away was quite another place' (7). The same goes for one of the island's inhabitants – Cruso (spelled without an e, distinguishing him, at least in writing, from Defoe's Crusoe) – whose life story she never learns to know properly:

I would gladly now recount to you the history of this singular Cruso, as I heard it from his own lips. But the stories he told me were so various, and so hard to reconcile one with another, that I was more and more driven to conclude age and isolation had taken their toll on his memory, and he no longer knew for sure what was truth, what fancy. (11-12)

Cruso is almost a negation of the adventurer portrayed by Daniel Defoe. He has only managed to save a small knife from the wreck, showing no wish to save more; he has kept no journal and does not share Susan Barton's regrets for not having done so; and his work on the island is entirely sterile, consisting of a pointless construction of stone terraces for which he has no seeds. 'I only clear the ground for them' Cruso replies to the bemused Susan Barton; 'Clearing the ground and piling stones is little enough, but it is better than sitting in idleness' (33). When she asks him why he has not built a boat and tried to escape, Cruso merely answers 'And where should I escape to? ... Brazil is hundreds of miles distant, and full of cannibals ... we shall see sailing-ships as well and better by staying at home' (13). Having kept no record to preserve a sense of time, 'no carvings, not even notches to indicate that he counted the years of his banishment or the cycles of the moon' (16), the character of Cruso is difficult to integrate properly in the memoir that Barton is writing.

Cruso's apathetic silence – his dispassionate nature, his futile desires – is all the more troublesome for Susan Barton's narrative because, contrary to Defoe's Crusoe, he has not taught Friday to speak his language. In fact, as she later discovers, Friday has no

tongue.<sup>14</sup> The story of Friday proves to be even more elusive and mysterious.<sup>15</sup> Her attempt to recount the true experiences on the island is prevented by absences or secrets, which, as Matthew Greenfield observes, ‘invite interpretation but fiercely resist it: they have the form of messages, but the envelopes cannot be opened and may be empty’ (Greenfield 1995, 231).

As we saw in chapter three, among the things that Lukács foregrounds as one of the particular potentials of the novel, at least in its traditional narrative form, is its connecting energies; or, as Peter Brooks has argued in *Reading for the Plot*, narrative forms convey plots that connect, recover, and reconstruct, that is, produce a causally ordered meaning of reality’s temporal flow of disparate and heterogeneous events:

Narrative is one of the ways in which we speak, one of the large categories in which we think. Plot is its thread of design and its active shaping force, the product of our refusal to allow temporality to be meaningless, our stubborn insistence on making meaning in the world and in our lives. (Brooks 1984, 323)

Susan Barton’s chronological recount of her experiences on the island is, however, constantly obstructed by a number of aspects that refuse to be integrated in – and to work as parts of – her story. The characters of her story, Friday and Cruso, as well as their stories and actions, are reluctant to be assimilated into – and thus ‘saved’ by – Susan Barton’s story. When the ship that will take them back to England and ‘civilisation’ arrives at the island, Friday immediately attempts to escape, but is captured on Barton’s request, while Cruso himself – like Conrad’s Kurtz – dies of fever on the ship. None of them seems to

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<sup>14</sup> There is also a scene in which Susan Barton suspects that Friday may in fact be castrated as well, although this is never confirmed; figuratively, Friday is ‘castrated’ or silenced in her discourse, yet on a *literal* level it remains uncertain.

<sup>15</sup> Friday’s silence presents yet another series of inconsistencies in Susan Barton’s memoir; how he lost his tongue; where he comes from; how he came to the island; whether he is a cannibal; why he does not rebel against Cruso’s command; why he plays the same melody again and again; what are his desires; and why he spreads petals on the sea. To all of these questions, Cruso’s stories are of no real assistance, but on the contrary open up the possibility ‘that a number of “truths” may be operating simultaneously’ (Jolly 1996, 3) – multiple possibilities which undermine any single, authoritative explanation: ‘in the end I did not know what was truth, what was lies, and what was mere rambling’ (Coetzee 1987, 12).



survive the journey into Susan Barton's narrative without actually vanishing, figuratively or literally.<sup>16</sup>

For much of the novel, Susan Barton's motive for telling the story is presented as a desire for truth. Thus, when the captain of the ship that saves them suggests that she may sell her story to a professional writer, who will also 'put in a dash of colour too', she immediately replies 'I will not have any lies told ... I would rather be the author of my own story than have lies told about me ... If I cannot come forward, as author, and swear to the truth of my tale, what will be the worth of it? I might as well have dreamed it in a snug bed in Chichester' (Coetzee 1987, 40). Barton's claim to narrative authority is the ability to confirm, as a witness, the truthfulness of the story, which also means that she must guarantee the truth of the story with her own being or identity.

The inconsistencies and gaps in her narrative threaten this desire for truth, or, more specifically, a desire for a truth substantiated and grounded in real events. She feels that in her story a 'liveliness is lost' (ibid.), that it is a mere imitation which cannot do justice to the original, real experience, and that she herself has not been fully integrated in her writing, partly because the island's inhabitants stubbornly have kept their stories for themselves. She cannot repress the sense of merely appearing as an insubstantial, ghostly person in the margin, and that she thus 'has violated herself by defacing herself in her own narrative' (Jolly 1996, 5).

To bring back the liveliness as well as the meaning of the story as a whole, which by implication means her own experiences – her own identity as a castaway, a survivor, a witness, as the centre of the story – she needs Mr. Foe, the professional writer, experienced in transforming castaway stories into successful, profitable adventure tales. She wants Mr.

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<sup>16</sup> See Jolly (1996); 8

Foe to bring back her life: 'Return to me the substance I have lost, Mr. Foe: that is my entreaty. For though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth' (Coetzee 1987, 51). Warned by the captain on the ship who rescues them, Mr. Foe's trade is however 'in books, not in truth' (40).

### Authorial Struggles

Mr. Foe's trade is not in the truth, yet 'truth' is an integrated part of the ways in which he promotes the saleability of his books, that is, his trade. As the epistolary chapter suggests, Mr. Foe, in whom Susan Barton has entrusted her manuscript of the story, is an elusive, secretive figure, troubled by debt and hiding from bailiffs, always on the lookout for the next sensational travel adventure from which he can profit. Eventually Susan Barton and Friday meet the author, only to find that Mr. Foe is dissatisfied with her narrative: 'The island is not a story in itself' (117), he observes, referring to its plainness, its lack of exciting elements, like cannibals or exotic animals. Popularity among readers is to him a sign of the story's 'truth'; to make Susan Barton's story exciting, to make it saleable, is to align it with the genre conventions of the travel adventure, and which furthermore means to compromise the singularity of the story itself – its own, singular truth.<sup>17</sup>

This also means, as it turns out a little later, that the actual problem for Mr. Foe is not so much the fact that Cruso represents something quite different from the active hero that readers will expect from a travel adventure, or that the story lacks scenes of cannibals

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<sup>17</sup> Susan Barton is, as Rosemary Jane Jolly observes, equally interested in making the story a bestseller, but for reasons and with intentions different from Mr. Foe. Turning the story of the island into a popular adventure tale means to her the prospect of an economically independent life, a life in which she can restore the imbalance of her misfortunes; to live an autonomous life, an individual in control of her own destiny, like Cruso's island-dream. In other words, the story written by Mr. Foe must rescue her (see Jolly 1996, 5). For an interesting overview of the figure of the castaway in South African writing (including a brief discussion of Coetzee's *Foe*), see Michael Titlestad's and Mike Kissack's article 'The persistent castaway in South African writing'.

invading the island. The problem is more precisely Susan Barton. She represents not only a character in the story, but also, and more problematically, a co-author insisting, as a witness, on the story's truthful rendering in the hands of Mr. Foe.

Mr. Foe's philosophy of writing is fundamentally at odds with Susan Barton's original and primary intentions, to narrate the story truthfully, a substantiated truth, grounded in lived events and experiences of specific referents, as recounted in her memoirs. Underlying Susan Barton's reasoning there is a fundamental contradiction that refuses to be reconciled. On the one hand, she expects Mr. Foe, as the professional writer, to produce a story that will substantiate its truth, explain its mysteries and enigmas, bring back its liveliness; yet on the other hand, to *substantiate* the story is also at the same time to compromise, if not wholly negate, its truth-value – a story which can only remain true insofar as it exposes its own inability to explain truthfully its mysteries and enigmas, bring back its liveliness, that is, substantiate its truth-value.

To Barton, this narrative paradox is initially due to the character of Cruso: 'She desires and expects Cruso to be Defoe's Robinson Crusoe' (Jolly 1996, 5). Barton's Cruso represents a narrative violation of the conventions which are prescribed by the genre of the travel adventure, the expectations and desires of the readers. The inability to reconcile Barton's Cruso with Defoe's Robinson Crusoe suggests not only the contradictory workings of Susan Barton's narrative desire, but ultimately tells us something about the nature of fiction itself; an irreconcilability which can be seen as an allegory of the *birth* of fiction in the modern sense.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Daniel Defoe is often seen as the father of modern fiction, the enigmatic negotiator of truth and lies, a writer on the market writing for someone and for something. In Defoe's short pamphlet *The Shortest-Way with the Dissenters: Or, Proposals for the Establishment of the Church* (published in 1702), the author claims to be a religious extremist arguing for the death of dissidents of the Church of England. Taken seriously by

Foe attempts to take the story away from her by offering her a different story – that is, by suggesting that Barton ought to include her own, previous story, the search for her kidnapped daughter in Bahia before she ended up on the island. Readers will hear an echo of Defoe's *Roxana* (published in 1724) in this story, in particular during the meta-fictional episode in *Foe* when Susan Barton is approached by an unknown girl, claiming to be her lost daughter.<sup>19</sup> Barton, however, dismisses the girl as being a manipulative authorial gesture carried out on Mr. Foe's demand. While Mr. Foe attempts to manipulate Susan Barton into accepting the story of *Roxana*, he wants to adapt the story of the island to the form of a proper travel adventure, that is, *Robinson Crusoe*, the canonical novel. But Barton is aware of this act of disempowerment, insisting that the story of the island must be narrated as independent from her own, previous story. Dissatisfied with Mr. Foe's alternative story of *Roxana*, which in any case would not have been possible to narrate truthfully since it would end unsuccessfully, unfinished, without Barton finding what she believes to be her real daughter, she instead wants to reclaim the authority of the island story. To reclaim the right to 'father' her story, she impersonates him: 'I write with your

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the public, it was eventually discovered that the author was in fact Daniel Defoe who had impersonated a religious extremist, and it was for the impersonation (rather than the extreme views) that Defoe as the author was punished. Defoe's pamphlet, as indeed his oeuvre as such, is among the first examples of writing exploring the ambiguities of writing in a modern sense, the complexities of the relationship between writer and writing (e.g. texts like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana* were originally not attributed to Defoe, primarily for commercial reasons, which on the other hand precisely made the dimension of authorship all the more pressing a concern in his works). For a comment on Daniel Defoe as the first modern fiction writer, see Coetzee's essay 'Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*' in which he calls Defoe 'an impersonator, a ventriloquist, even a forger ... The kind of "novel" he is writing ... is a more or less literal imitation of the kind of recital his hero or heroine would have given had he or she really existed. It is a fake autobiography' (Coetzee 2001, 19).

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of *Foe*'s inter-textual elaboration of *Roxana*, see Spivak's essay 'Theory in the Margin', as well as *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*; 174-197

pen on your paper, and when the sheets are completed they go into your chest. So your life continues to be lived, though you are gone' (Coetzee 1987, 65).<sup>20</sup>

### **Cannibalism and Otherness**

Susan Barton nevertheless cannot overcome her own insubstantiality in writing, that is, reconcile truth with substance. Truth only appears in the form of a negation that undermines the ground beneath her story. Unlike other female heroines of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, including Roxana and Moll Flanders, Susan Barton's role-playing is a reluctant shelter, rather than a pleasurable freedom, in a world full of dangers – for example when she disguises herself as a man, but only after being harassed on the road. As Matthew Greenfield observes: 'She wants to fix and preserve a stable and integral self by authorizing if not authoring a single version of her story' (Greenfield 1995, 229). This is also why she must reject the girl claiming to be her daughter. Susan Barton must resist being cast as a mother if she wants to reclaim the right to 'father' the story of the island. To claim narrative authority, to claim the power to transform life into a substantial truth in narrative, is nevertheless to perform a practice which comes dangerously close to Mr. Foe's ethos of writing – the same degree of fictionalisation, violence, and cannibalism. Gradually, Susan Barton succumbs to the pressure of Mr. Foe's authorial appropriation, his desire to absorb and devour her claim to narrative power as a truthful witness. Near the end of chapter three, the two struggling authors merge, ending up in bed together. Biting Susan Barton's lip and sucking the blood from her wound, he murmurs: 'This is my manner of preying on the living' (Coetzee 1987, 139). In an explicit way, *Foe* as a novel seems to emphasise the

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<sup>20</sup> As Rosemary Jane Jolly observes, 'She associates the exercise of this power with liberation; and, tellingly, views it as an expression of the masculine authorial fantasy of self-engenderment' (Jolly 1996, 141).

violence involved in the act of narrating; the figurative cannibalism of narrative authority – in contrast to the possibly *literal* cannibalism of Friday.<sup>21</sup>

The inconsistencies in Susan Barton's story represent blind spots that must be uncovered, illuminated – or otherwise repressed. Mr. Foe chooses the latter since he has no need to uncover the truth of the story's silences. On the contrary, it allows him artistic freedom – for example assuming that Friday is a cannibal without actually knowing so. Barton, however, cannot merely replace absence with lies; she must translate the figure of Friday faithfully, or otherwise lose the credibility of her own story. If the story is not true, her identity is inevitably cast into serious doubt at the same time. Susan Barton tries to communicate with Friday, for example through language, writing, drawings, gesticulations, music, and desire. Yet all these attempts leave Friday unresponsive, self-absorbed. The 'meaning' of Friday remains stubbornly resistant.<sup>22</sup>

The inability to penetrate Friday's muteness, his otherness, is one that threatens to reveal an uncomfortable truth about the inadequacies and limitations of both Mr. Foe's and Susan Barton's power of storytelling – a truth exposing their interpretations of Friday as ultimately being caught in a blind hermeneutical circle; that is to say, largely self-confirming interpretational efforts which in fact uncover little else but projections of their own desires. Aware of this dilemma, Susan Barton, whose narrative desire is the one most directly affected by the implications of this hermeneutical trap, recognises that the centre of her story, its truth, is haunted by an absence which can only be replaced by lies:

Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman. What is the truth of Friday? You will respond: he is neither cannibal nor laundryman,

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<sup>21</sup> See Jolly (1996); 8

<sup>22</sup> Friday's apparent lack of desire or curiosity represents to Susan Barton a kind of laziness which she ultimately interprets as a lack of 'civilization'. On the other hand, Friday's lack of interest in *her* is also a threat to Barton's sense of subjectivity.

these are mere names, they do not touch his essence, he is a substantial body, he is himself, Friday is Friday. But that is not so. No matter what he is to himself ... what he is to the world is what I make of him. (121-122)

As Dominic Head observes, Friday's silence is both 'a resistance to, yet also the product of, the dominant discourse' (Head 1997, 121) – a silence which apparently both renders him helpless in the text, but also seems to hinder the text in reaching him. Friday gradually grows old and loses his liveliness, as Mr. Foe observes: 'They lose their vivacity when deprived of human flesh' (Coetzee 1987, 127). But if Friday gradually is transformed into an insubstantial ghost through the figurative cannibalism of Susan Barton, she too must eventually starve: Friday's insubstantiality makes him indigestible, that is, he becomes an enigmatic sign, a ghost hiding in dark corners.

### **Thresholds of Translation**

Desperate to translate, faithfully, the figure of Friday into the story, Susan Barton starves as she is unable to devour and digest his untranslatable otherness. Her translation becomes a text of failed translational attempts to recover, faithfully, the originality or singularity of Friday's otherness, and, thus, by implication, to *save* the 'true' meaning of her story, which will confirm her identity as a witness.

But Susan Barton is never saved, never redeemed, ending up as the disfigured, swollen corpse trapped inside a sunken phantom ship in the novel's last sentences:

In the black space of this cabin the water is still and dead, the same water as yesterday, as last year, as three hundred years ago. Susan Barton and her dead captain, fat as pigs in their white nightclothes, their limbs extending stiffly from their trunks, their hands, puckered from long immersion, held out in blessing, float like stars against the low roof. (156-157)

Her story becomes a narrative of non-existence or negation, one that is incapable of reconciling a contradictory narrative desire for truthfulness and meaning, concluding in

failure and silence. *Foe* may present Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* as a road not taken, as Gayatri Spivak writes: 'The actual is presented as the counterfactual. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which engenders *Foe*, does not exist' (Spivak 1991, 167). And yet the very imagination of *Robinson Crusoe*'s non-existence at the same time throws Susan Barton's narrative into a bottomless darkness of pure, abstract fiction.

But what does the silence of this bottomless darkness tell us? Is *Foe* a story which ultimately informs us of the un-translatability of radical otherness – that any attempt to translate, faithfully, the other is bound to end up shipwrecked? A failed translation is usually conceived as one that has failed to render the original text in terms of faithfulness or similarity. Conversely, a successful translation is one that has erased all traces of itself, that is, one that does not *read* like a translation, but on the contrary reads as though it was the original text itself.

The story of *Foe*, the story of Susan Barton's narrative desire, is the story of a failed translation of otherness, which is to say a translation that fails to erase itself. Coetzee's novel as an imaginary projection constitutes a suspension of *Robinson Crusoe*, the imaginary pretext of Defoe's novel, and, as such, it grounds itself upon the imaginary possibility of *Robinson Crusoe*'s non-existence. Yet since the *failure* of Coetzee's novel, to become the story of *Robinson Crusoe*, is precisely the condition of its existence as an imaginary possibility, this failure also constitutes the very possibility of conceiving *Foe* as a text that 'truthfully' speaks silence itself, a silence conditioned by the existence of *Robinson Crusoe* as a text that cannot allow *Foe*'s failure to enter its story.

One could see this as a negative potential released through *Foe*'s imaginary projection, one that comes close to Walter Benjamin's concept of translatability. In chapter



two I briefly mentioned Benjamin's translation theory in connection with some aspects of Gayatri Spivak's call for a greater attention toward the figures of the literary within the field of postcolonial studies; here I want to discuss Benjamin's concept of translation further, both in order to demarcate some of the theoretical issues at stake in Coetzee's text, as well as connecting those issues with the context from which Gayatri Spivak's concerns emerged.

According to Benjamin, all languages undergo 'complete transformation over the centuries' (Benjamin 1999, 74), which means that a translation striving to reproduce the *meaning* of an original text is fundamentally misleading; what must be translated is not meaning, not subject matter, which is always in flux, both in the original text's language as well as in the language to which it is translated. Rather, the translation must 'demonstrate' what Benjamin sees as 'the kinship of languages' (73). At the heart of Benjamin's language theory is a distinction between what he calls 'the mode of intentions' (*Art des Meinens*), and what he calls the original text's 'intentions', or 'the intended object' (*Das Gemeinte*). In each language, 'the mode of intentions' is always singular: *Brot* to a German means something different than *Pain* to someone from France, yet both words 'mean the very same thing' (75), that is, they both refer to the same 'intended object'. Benjamin's point is that as long as national languages are kept apart, kept separate and isolated in their insular domesticity, one can never recover or reveal this hidden kinship.

Within this context, the act of translating takes on a renewed function. Rather than translate the original's meaning, the translational process must reveal the kinship of languages by 'testing' how *remote* 'the mode of intentions' is from 'the intended object' in the original text (and, by implication, the translation's own language) – a *remoteness* which

also tests how *closely* it may approach the revelation of the kinship of language: ‘how close can it be brought by the knowledge of this remoteness’ (ibid.). The messianic task of the translation is, however, only one that is able to reach a provisional knowledge, as a ‘way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages’ (ibid.). Even so, what exactly is revealed in this provisional knowledge of the kinship of languages – what is the original’s ‘intended object’, the intentions, which the translation must render? Throughout the essay, Benjamin constantly shifts between different expressions, like the messianic longing for ‘linguistic complementation’; a ‘pure language’ which is the sum of all languages’ intentions supplementing each other; and finally, that dimension ‘which is meant in all languages’ (80). To Benjamin, the ‘intentions’ are fragments of a language of truth, a truthful language; that is, the *original*, prelapsarian, divine language, which, after the fall, has become divided into a multiplicity of provisional languages that can only be grasped negatively, un-originally. In the profane world, the ‘truth of language’ is, in Benjamin’s view, a ‘nucleus’ which remains *untranslatable* insofar as one attempts to render its meaning. This nucleus is also what the translation paradoxically must translate, precisely by negating or destroying the meaning of the original text’s language.

The translator must find an effect in his or her *own* language ‘which produces in it the echo of the original’ (77). According to Benjamin, this is achieved by a translational strategy of *literalness*: ‘A literal rendering of the syntax completely demolishes the theory of reproduction of meaning and is a direct threat to comprehensibility’ (78).<sup>23</sup> One could

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<sup>23</sup> Benjamin’s emphasis on literalness also distinguishes his theory from deconstructive theories of translation, despite many similarities (for an account of deconstructive translation practice, see Tejaswini Niranjana’s book *Siting Translation*). In deconstruction, the literal is problematic since it connotes something ‘proper’, as opposed to the figurative, which is always a false proposition. In poststructuralist accounts of translation, a ‘proper’ rendering of an original text is always a misreading, a failure, which at the same time reveals that the original itself is a disarticulation. The original, as for example in Paul de Man’s deconstructive reading of Walter Benjamin’s translation essay (“‘Conclusions’”), is de-sacralised by the translation, yet at the same

also say that what Benjamin wants the translator to render is not meaning, the subject-matter, but rather the original's *form*, because 'it is self-evident how greatly fidelity in reproducing the form impedes the rendering of the sense' (ibid.). In the original text, form and content usually correlate together in an effort to generate some kind of meaning. The translation, however, 'transplants' the original 'into a more definitive linguistic realm' (76), which is no longer reproducible (like the original), because the emphasis on formal literalness or syntax – that is, the fidelity to the singular positions of words in the original – breaks any unity between form and content, which might contain meaning. In this way, the translation liberates the original's pure language, its intentions, from 'a heavy alien meaning' (80), a *foreignness* – constitutive to all profane languages – which precisely has been erased, covered, or familiarised in one's own, native language. At this specific point, Benjamin argues, the translational practice, itself becoming an echo of a language not quite belonging to anywhere, locks two different languages together in a mutual recognition of their otherness.

It is a recognition which involves loss, activated in between two languages, which allows a kind of transparency. The translation is transparent, Benjamin argues, it does not cover the original, does not block its light, 'but allows the pure language ... to shine upon the original all the more fully' (79). This transparency, which more specifically means the 'literalness' of the translation, also designates what Benjamin refers to as an arcade: 'For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade' (ibid.).

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time the very idea of an 'original' is however preserved, even though it turns out to be a failure. Translation, in this dynamic, remains a one-way process, still retaining the idea of the purity or untranslatability of the 'original' (see also Chow 1995, 186-188).

As an arcade, literal or formal translation allows light to shine through to the original text, rendering its contingency and historicity.<sup>24</sup>

### Arcades of Foreignness

The loss, as it is preserved and exhibited in this arcade, is not only one that belongs to Friday's loss of identity, origins, and locations. Rather, it is one that reverberates, affecting Susan Barton as a figure of narrative desire which is obstructed from reaching its goal because of Friday's loss. Susan Barton's attempt to translate Friday's otherness ends in failure; a *literal* translation, rendering no meaning, because the sign of Friday's body returns as an empty, insubstantial echo of her own sign, devoid of meaning. As such, the failure of Susan Barton's attempt to translate faithfully is at the same time what allows the foreignness of Friday to appear, negatively, *in* its otherness, that is to say, situated in Susan Barton's own language without being domesticated or familiarised, but on the contrary *literally* breaking down the meaning of her language, turning it into a foreign or other language – an uncanny language. Susan Barton's failure to translate, faithfully, Friday's otherness, reminds us, as Sigmund Freud observed in *The Uncanny* (published in 1919), that 'we ourselves speak a language that is foreign' (Freud 2001, 221).<sup>25</sup>

It is in this way that *Foe* as a text of failed translations attempts to configure possibilities of transgressing binary, one-way models of cultural transference; possibilities of experiencing the strangeness of the provisional, narrow limitations of one's own

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<sup>24</sup> In this connection, see also Spivak's essay 'Theory in the Margin' where she comments on the arbitrariness and historicity of the words which Susan Barton attempts to teach Friday, such as the word 'Africa': 'Africa is only a time-bound naming; like all proper names it is a mark with an arbitrary connection to its referent, a catachresis. The earth as temporary dwelling has no foundational name' (Spivak 1991, 170).

<sup>25</sup> See also Spivak who quotes and uses this phrase from Freud's *The Uncanny* in her book *Death of a Discipline*; 22

constructed familiarity through which otherness is usually defined and recognised. *Foe* seems to open an arcade of foreignness in which the 'original' and the 'translation', and the figures of these two terms, may possibly recognise one another in their shared otherness.<sup>26</sup>

When Mr. Foe and Susan Barton discuss the substantiality of their beings, the latter concludes: 'I am substantial; and you too are substantial, no less and no more than any of us. We are all alive, we are all substantial, we are all in the same world' (Coetzee 1987, 152). But as Mr. Foe, who profits on stories of loss, observes; they are not all in the same world, because she has omitted Friday. Friday's other world is a world of loss – an arcade of foreignness, and of transparency, which illuminates the text's configuration of desires.

In the final section we enter this arcade of foreignness. The story, now freed from quotation marks, is taken over by a new, unidentified narrative persona, who makes two attempts to make Friday speak. The first time is in an apartment where Barton and Mr. Foe, seemingly dead, lie sprawled on the bed while Friday is lying in the alcove. The narrator opens Friday's mouth, hearing the sound of the island. With this image we are transferred to a house, in which the narrator yet again encounters the trio, and again the focus is on Friday, whose neck reveals a scar from a rope or chain.<sup>27</sup> The narrator finds Susan Barton's unpublished manuscript, and, while reading, slips 'overboard' and literally *into* Susan

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<sup>26</sup> Friday's otherness does not allow a fixed, stable, univocal interpretation of meaning; on the contrary, it is an otherness that is manifested through activities that remain enigmatic – such as playing repetitiously the same melody; throwing petals on water; dancing in a state of manic self-absorption. Friday's continuous drawings of the sign O are not merely black holes, but also arcades of transparency, illuminating the silences in the narrative.

<sup>27</sup> As Rosemary Jane Jolly has observed, Friday's scars can be seen as an ironic comment on the episode during which Susan Barton attempts to send him back on a ship to wherever he came from, having no idea where that might be (reflecting the simplistic idea of a possible return to some 'original' condition before imperialism); around his neck she hangs a 'bill of freedom' to state that he is a free man, not to be treated as a slave, which nevertheless does not bring about Friday's liberation, but on the contrary indicates the lack of his rights as a human being (see Jolly 1996, 11 & 15).

Barton's manuscript, with which the novel began, that is, falls into the water covered with petals, floating like a flower.<sup>28</sup>

Sprawling in the bed of seaweed, the narrator dives (and thus fulfilling Susan Barton's desire) and finds the wreck which, as Dominic Head has observed, seems to conflate three different ships: 'Cruso's wreck (it is located off his island); the ship from which Barton is originally set adrift (she is found with "her captain"); and the vessel which rescues her (and Friday, who is on board as well)' (Head 1997, 125). For the third time, we encounter Barton and her partner (now the captain), as well as Friday who yet again is the only one giving a sign of life. And again the narrator tries to open his mouth, to force him to speak. The novel ends with the (non-)sound of Friday's silence streaming out, passing through his body, the narrator, the ship and running 'northward and southward to the ends of the earth' (Coetzee 1987, 157).

### **Worldliness, Criticism and Literature**

The last chapter of the novel presents a dense, metaphorical intertwining of previous events or fragments, tied together in a metonymic movement which seems to resist being interpreted without being violated or reduced. It *speaks* the silence, literally, by moving, gradually, toward a point of sensuous non-communicability, 'not a place of words' (Coetzee 1987, 157) but of collapse, that is, a place where the words of the novel cease. As the narrator says, this is the 'home of Friday' (ibid.), but at the same time it is also the home of western culture's silence. It is a silence coming from the depths of other, forgotten

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<sup>28</sup> The manuscript starts by addressing the author – 'Dear Mr. Foe, At last I could row no further' (Coetzee 1987, 155) – thus deviating slightly from the opening of chapter one, which begins 'At last I could row no further' (5); one could see the manuscript which the unnamed narrator encounters in the last chapter as a combination of *both* Susan Barton's original manuscript *and* chapter two's epistolary narrative, consisting of letters addressed to Mr. Foe.

histories, manifesting itself with a ghostly authority that silences or ends the narrative of *Foe*; a silence embodied in the figure of Friday, chained to the ship of slavery whose scars, like signs, are inscribed upon his ghostly body. Friday's 'home', as it says in the novel, is 'a place where bodies are their own signs' (ibid.), that is, the foreign signs of the chains tying him to another identity, whose enigmatic, uncanny story may be recognised, in another('s) language, as western culture's own, repressed imperial history.

As Derek Attridge observes, the ending of *Foe* seems to take the modernist project of the novel one step further: 'It is as if in its dealings with otherness the main part of the story, for all its subversion of realist narrative, has been too conventional' (Attridge 2004b, 27). I would agree with this point, and furthermore agree with Rosemary Jane Jolly's argument that *Foe* can be read as an 'allegory of narrative strategies' (Jolly 1996, 2), which ultimately draws parallels, or at least explicitly explores such parallels, between the act of narrating and cannibalism, both implying violence and the suppression of difference.<sup>29</sup> The main *target* for much of the novel, as several critics rightly have pointed out, is the classic realist text and its alleged act of suppressing difference and otherness; the radical ending of *Foe* seems once and for all to dismantle the project of realism.<sup>30</sup>

So far I have attempted to render, faithfully, what I see as the aesthetic project of *Foe*, its narrative strategies and literary codifications; what is at stake in the text as a *literary* text. In the following, I want to focus more specifically on the text's complicated

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<sup>29</sup> See Jolly (1996); 8. Rosemary Jane Jolly furthermore argues that representation (the realist representation of Susan Barton and the popularising representation of Mr. Foe) of otherness implies the suppression of difference (see ibid. 3).

<sup>30</sup> E.g. Kossew writes: 'It is this realist model of authorship itself, along with such related aspects as "truth" and "reality," that is being questioned in *Foe*' (Kossew 1996, 164). Similarly, Titlestad and Kissack argue that *Foe*'s 'post-modern play, its anti-realism, precludes any interpretation based in an assumed mimesis; we are reminded constantly that we are caught in a web of textuality' (Titlestad & Kissack 2007, 211). I would argue that the novel's alleged critique of realism (and I agree that the novel *is* a critique of realism) may also be seen as too caricatured, too simplified; Susan Barton's desire for example is too absolute, too demanding, and hence too unrealistic – unless the impossibility of her alleged desire for realism itself becomes the point.

relationship with critical discourse, whose ambiguity, I would argue, becomes particularly pronounced in the last section of *Foe*. While the radical ending of *Foe* can be read as a final critique of the traditional realist text, it may also, as various critics have pointed out, be read as a cautious disclaimer of the novel's preceding project. *Foe*'s final chapter can to some extent be read as a warning against its own, poststructuralist-inflected modality, a warning against the one-dimensional focus on writing and textuality which ignores the material, worldly circumstances from which texts originate.<sup>31</sup> Insofar as one reads the ambiguous ending as a cautious disclaimer of the novel's overall poststructuralist project, one may also see this as a way of 'double-safeguarding' its aesthetic claims. There is a characteristic ambiguity at stake here, which, I would argue, partly is related to *Foe*'s complex relationship with postcolonial theory – indeed, an ambiguity which to some extent explicitly *inscribes* the novel within the discourse of postcolonial theory.

To several critics, *Foe* is Coetzee's most 'theoretical' novel,<sup>32</sup> which, I would argue, also constitutes one of the most important factors as to *why* it has become a canonised text within the field of postcolonial studies. Coetzee's text is, in some ways, both an exemplary *and* a problematic postcolonial text; the novel is exemplary because it evokes and deals explicitly and self-consciously with issues that are central to postcolonial studies; but

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<sup>31</sup> Jolly, for example, argues that the 'ending of *Foe* ... suggests that the novel itself goes beyond the deconstructive project of its own postmodernism. The figure of Friday in *Foe* can and has been described as a postmodern figuring of the other. However, the figure of Friday can also be read as a kind of critique of the postmodern strategy for representing the other. In this light the figure of Friday can be seen as suggesting an alternative to the violations that both recuperate and postmodern strategies for figuring the other inflict upon their subjects' (Jolly 1996, 142-143). For an exposition of various interpretations of *Foe*'s ending, see Kossew (1996); 172-177

<sup>32</sup> See Jolly (1996); 1. Similarly, Teresa Dovey argues that 'the critical activity of *Foe* operates within a far wider discursive area [than his first four novels]. Indeed, the space of this arena would seem to be constituted by nothing less than the discourses of feminism, postcolonialism and postmodernism' (Dovey 1988, 330).



Coetzee's text is also problematic because it has become almost *too* exemplary.<sup>33</sup> As an exemplary novel, *Foe* eminently circles around the dimension of otherness, or rather, how to represent otherness and marginality through narrative strategies, without violating these dimensions; it explores its own formal insufficiencies, its lack of legitimacy, by simultaneously enacting *and* disclaiming its literary project, as I have attempted to show hitherto.<sup>34</sup>

Seen within this perspective, Coetzee's text embodies an extreme act of suspension; an imagined, ghostly demarcation of the margins of another narrative, namely Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Through this subversive-imaginary project, *Foe* arrests movement, narrativity, and working-through in order to fixate a non-narrative (or, indeed, *pre*-narrative) moment within an un-locatable space or arcade, as I tried to show via the excursus to Walter Benjamin's theory of the translation-as-arcade; an arcade in which the dimensions of foreignness and otherness are explored, investigated, and illuminated.

If *Foe*'s painstaking exploration of literary strategies identifies traditional realist narrative as being the ultimate problem, one could however also argue that this exploration of the limits of traditional narrative constitutes a kind of projection through which the novel distances itself from alleged acts of narrative violence; an act of distancing which in turn bestows the aesthetic project of *Foe* with an aura of radicality and legitimacy. As such,

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<sup>33</sup> Ian Glenn, for example, argues that the theoretical or critical dimension in Coetzee's texts 'may be said to have attempted to make his works critic-proof' (Glenn 1994, 25). See Dominic Head's *J.M. Coetzee* (24-27) for a discussion of Glenn's argument as well as other critics who have suggested that in Coetzee's works the distinction between theory and fiction seems to have been dissolved.

<sup>34</sup> As a text exploring its own formal insufficiencies as a *narrative*, I tend to read *Foe* as a *modernist* text (rather than, say, a postmodernist text, although clearly characteristics of both 'isms' can be found in the novel, depending on how one defines those terms) – a text which in an emblematic way questions and resists narrativity as such. I follow here in part Eysteinsson's definition of modernism: 'the entire issue of modernism is especially momentous and foregrounded in the case of narrative, for the aesthetic proclivities of modernism seem bound to go against the very notion of narrativity, narrative progression, or storytelling in any traditional sense. One way to define modernism would be to say that it resists reality-fabrications that are recuperable as "stories" or as situations that can readily be reformulated in sociopragmatic terms' (Eysteinsson 1990, 187).

*Foe*'s project apparently avoids the traps involved in representing otherness – precisely through the exploration of the limits of another, allegedly different, aesthetic modality.

In this sense, *Foe*'s project is not only about finding a way of negotiating otherness or marginality in the arcade of foreignness, but also about legitimising, and producing the need for, the discourse of postcolonial theory, by painstakingly acknowledging the shortcomings of its own formal means of representation. As such, *Foe* emerges as a canonised text precisely in terms of its allegorical enactment of the claims of postcolonial theory – a text selected because of its fetishised suspension of representativity, marking and formulating the impossibility of its own project; the inadequacies of the literary and the importance of theory as *the* legitimate negotiator of otherness, *the* radical position.

*Foe* may in this sense be read as a kind of aesthetic blockage, a text that constructs the ambiguous space of an arcade that not only negotiates foreignness and otherness, but also enacts a process of legitimising those very codes of negotiation – rather than a *working-through* of what I have referred to as the utopian-interpretive potential of the literary within postcolonial space. As such, *Foe* may constitute an 'allegory of narrative strategies', but equally, I would argue, an ideologically coded melancholic mourning of the loss of the figures of the literary – a melancholia which moreover implicitly carves out the space for *theory*, as a legitimate dimension working through the loss and failures of the literary.

We may illuminate this ambiguous relationship further – the relationship between postcolonial modernist textuality writing back to the centre via an exploration of the limits of narrative, and postcolonial theory as the legitimate negotiator of otherness – through an excursus to two critical principles coined and developed by Edward Said, namely affiliation

and worldliness, which I see as particularly illuminative in this context. In the essay-collection *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (published in 1983), Edward Said focuses on what he sees as the ‘worldly’ dimension of the text’s discursive situatedness within various formations of power, a situatedness which traditional criticism tends to ignore. Closely linked to, albeit more refined than, the notion of worldliness is the concept of *affiliation*, which refers to the transactions, transformations, interactions and interplays of the text within the discursive network of power relations with which it is affiliated (and which stands in opposition to the notion of *filiation*, embodying natural bonds, linearity, centre, completion, and paternal authority). According to Said,

one way of imagining the critical issue of aesthetic genesis is to view the text as a dynamic field, rather than as a static bloc, of words. This has a certain range of reference, a system of tentacles (which I have been calling affiliative) partly potential, partly actual: to the author, to the reader, to a historical situation, to other texts, to the past and present. In one sense no text is finished, since its potential range is always being extended by every additional reader. (Said 1983, 157)

Affiliative criticism, as Said explains in an interview, attempts to make ‘explicit all kinds of connections that we tend to forget and that have to be made explicit and even dramatic in order for political change to take place’ (Viswanathan 2004, 336).

The act of evaluating the literary is according to Edward Said ‘fundamentally to value it as the individual work of an individual writer tangled up in circumstances taken for granted by everyone, such as things as residence, nationality, a familiar locale, language, friends, and so on’ (Said 2001, xv). By seeing the valuable aspect of the literary, the conveyance of value through a literary text, as somehow opposed to, while still being situated in relation to, the coordinates of a familiar discourse, Said’s critical writing traces the experiences of uprootedness, dislocation and exile, that is, traces of affiliative networks, while performing a double-perspective, one that takes into account simultaneously ‘how to read the work *and* its worldly situation’ (ibid.). In *Beginnings*, Said explains that whereas

the traditional form of the novel (e.g. *Robinson Crusoe*), and the conventional criticism it encouraged, operated according to filiative principles, *radicality* is fundamentally tied to the affiliative principle, embodied in what Said sees as ‘the *methodological* vitality of modernism’ (Said 1975, 376).

Initially, it is easy to see the discourse of modernism as constituting a radically *affiliative* break with an earlier discourse. The affiliative principle, as embodied in modernist literature (undogmatic; suspicious of totalising gestures; oppositional etc.), becomes *the* radical form of literature; the modernist literary text is affiliative *because* it negatively explores the impossibility of its own project – and hence its need for criticism or theory, which thus is granted authority and legitimacy. Yet, the concept of affiliation also implies its own set of problematics. Bruce Robbins has outlined, on the basis of Said’s position in *The World, The Text, The Critic*, a tripartite pattern of the affiliative process:

(1) an initial break with natural filiation – the unchosen, almost biological relationships enmeshing the individual in a given culture – leads to (2) a “pressure to produce new and different ways of conceiving human relationships,” artificial and compensatory social bonds ... which now however assume (3) all the authority of the old filiative order, becoming “no less orthodox and dominant than culture itself.” (Robbins 1983, 72)

The potential reification of the principle of affiliation, especially within the context of an increasingly institutionalised academic discourse, seems to raise the question as to how some, if any, forms of modernist writing can avoid this negative process of gradual institutionalisation or reification, that is, a process in which the principle of affiliation becomes trapped within its own self-confirming system of authority.

The atmosphere of melancholia, as I discussed earlier, is an expression of the awareness of a lack of a distinct notion of the margin, particularly noticeable within the postcolonial relation to the figures of the literary; the figures of the literary, being

singularly literary *as* figures of otherness and marginality, constitute a problematic, I would argue, which can be seen as related to the modernist ethos underlying Edward Said's critical discourse, as well as, in a larger perspective, the dominant field of contemporary postcolonial studies. That the 'methodological vitality of modernism' has possibly, at least to some extent, become institutionalised, would seem to raise a series of concerns with regards to the legitimacy of the methodology underlying Said's critical vocabulary, a critical language which, as Abdirahman Hussein has observed, has become the 'common currency in the past decade and a half' (Hussein 2002, 165).

As 'constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse' (Said 1983, 29), Said's affiliative criticism may be seen as one that legitimises its radicality *through* its relation to its phantasmagorical 'ego-ideal', namely modernist literary writing. One could argue that the work of legitimisation at stake in Said's critical discourse follows as a consequence after the collapse of the filiative principle; haunted by oedipal guilt, the strategies of miming, parodying or – indeed – writing back to an alleged realist-authoritative and filiative text may be seen as attempts coming to terms with the critical illegitimacy of affiliation as a critical principle, and the specific *need* for legitimising mechanisms.

The melancholia of contemporary postcolonial studies, as it has been shaped and outlined in particular by the critical authority of Edward Said, can in a wider sense, as I have argued, be seen as a defensive strategy, protecting itself from the fear of being revealed as a critical fiction – that its insights, claims and evidences, as confirmed and demonstrated through the literary text, appear as phantasmagorical projections, and which furthermore means that its radicality and political commitment appear as a mere spectacle,

contributing to global commodification. This fear, I have argued, is precisely expressed through the excessive amount of self-criticism and self-interrogation in much contemporary postcolonial criticism, and which I read as a process of legitimisation, reinforced by the phantasmagorical construction of the literary ego-ideal, the canonised postcolonial text. That is, the literary text chosen and canonised as being representative of the postcolonial imperative because it exemplifies the claims of the field, and thus legitimises it.

One example of this phantasmagorical or anamorphic transfiguration of the literary would be the fetishisation of the text as ‘writing back to the centre’, such as J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* – a text embodying a resistant and self-conscious strategy actively involved in reversing the apparent effects of the process of global commodification, the hybridisation of the cultural edifices of the world. The figure of writing back to the centre is a pleasurable, even masochistic, fantasy unfolded along what can be seen as an oedipal dynamic of a progeny rebelling against originating paternity that must be subverted; postcolonial criticism configures a notion of the postcolonial literary as a dimension that rebels and viciously attacks a (constructed) western ‘father-figure’.<sup>35</sup> Arun P. Mukherjee has argued that this scenario allows ‘only one modality, one discursive position. We are forever forced to interrogate European discourses, of only one particular kind, the ones that degrade and deny our humanity. I would like to respond that our cultural productions are created in response to our own needs’ (Mukherjee 1990, 6).<sup>36</sup> If the current atmosphere of melancholia can be seen as both an expression of loss as well as a pre-emptive response to this loss, the ongoing process of coming to terms with the anxiety of paternal influence – as

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<sup>35</sup> See furthermore Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* for a link between colonialism and the Oedipal figure and Celia Britton’s *Race and the Unconscious: Freudianism in French Caribbean Thought* for a discussion of the Oedipus complex in a postcolonial context.

<sup>36</sup> I quote here from McLeod (2000); 28

an indeterminate repetitive compulsion – is also an expression of an insufficient attempt to work through the ambiguities of otherness in the postcolonial arcade, an expression of an unwillingness to take risks and responsibility.

### **The Beginning is a Ruin**

An arcade is to Benjamin never an easy, straightforward passageway. When Benjamin argues that the translation is like an arcade that allows pure language to shine upon the original all the more fully, and that this involves literalness and transparency, he is at the same time being obscure. It does not mean that the translation's literal rendering of the original must make the 'original' all the more clear and visible, which would mean to revalorise the 'original'. In that sense, the translation would be no more than a mere passageway through which the reader is allowed to consume a foreign text.

The arcade, as Benjamin describes it in his unfinished work *The Arcades Project*, is a space of consumption, a market of desires and temptations transfigured or translated into commodities whose origins are lost. The light of the arcade, Rey Chow comments in an essay on Benjamin's translation theory, 'is a profane, rather than pure and sacred, light, to which non-Western cultures are subjected if they want a place in the contemporary world' (Chow 1995, 201). It is the place where foreignness of otherness is violently negotiated in terms of one's own desires.

Benjamin's literalness in the arcade of translation is rather connected to the idea of breaking down the *figurations* or *allegorisations* of the objects on display.<sup>37</sup> The literal

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<sup>37</sup> In a discussion of Benjamin's concept of allegory, as developed in the latter's thesis on the German *Trauerspiel*, Georg Lukács links it with modernism per se and argues that it merely furthers the process of abstraction: 'Modern allegory, and modernist ideology ... deny the *typical*. By destroying the coherence of the world, they reduce detail to the level of mere particularity (once again, the connection between modernism

translation alienates the 'original', exposing it as a translation, a commodity, which has repressed its origin – the site of its own translation.<sup>38</sup> As a text already *in* translation, *in* language always-already in the process of being translated, Benjamin's translation cannot claim the 'original' as its truthful origin, if this means a fixed, stable constellation of signification. Both the 'original' and the 'translation' are situated, at particular moments in the flux of history, in a proliferating 'language forest', and it is within the context of this 'language forest' that the translation's own language must address the 'original': 'it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one' (Benjamin 1999, 77).

In one sense, *Foe* calls into the 'language forest' from which *Robinson Crusoe* originates, receiving an echo of the novel's reverberating silence, which is also, in a figurative sense, the literal existence of *Foe* as an imaginary projection. As an imaginary projection, *Foe* is the filiative origin of *Robinson Crusoe*, yet it is an origin that is profoundly ruined.<sup>39</sup> It is an origin which cannot be translated into Defoe's novel. As such, Coetzee's novel can be seen as constituting an arcade of foreignness, displaying otherness

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and naturalism is plain)' (Lukács 1979, 43). Lukács's exaggerated critique of modernism should, however, be seen against the background of his growing concerns about fascism and Nazism, as Mary Gluck has argued: 'Lukács's argument against modernism ... had to do not so much with the modernists' complicity with fascism but, rather, with their impotence to forge effective weapons against it' (Gluck 1986, 881).

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin's notion of the 'original' as already being in/a translation, also to some extent distinguishes his theory, despite many similarities, from poststructuralist-oriented translation theories. In the latter, the 'original' is de-sacralised as a site of authority, while the secondariness of the translation is revalued as liberating. However, the *notion* of the 'original' is still intact, even if it turns out to be a failure; conversely, in Benjamin's theory, 'original' and 'translation' are placed side by side, as fragments of a larger, as-yet-to-come language. Within the context of postcolonial studies, one could argue that the notion of 'writing back to the centre' is basically a deconstructive case, that is, a strategy deconstructing the hierarchical notion of the original, the centre of authority, while endowing the site of 'translation', the position from which writing back is initiated, with radicality; yet a strategy which also accepts the notion of the 'original', even if it is deconstructed. Characteristically, one may read *Foe* both as a deconstructive 'writing back' to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (which would be the orthodox postcolonial reading), as well as an arcade of foreignness in the Benjaminian sense (which is the one I have attempted to follow in my reading of the text).

<sup>39</sup> I follow here Derrida's notion of the beginning: 'In the beginning, at the origin, there was ruin. At the origin comes ruin; ruin comes to the origin, it is what first comes and happens to the origin, in the beginning. With no promise of restoration' (Derrida 1993, 65).



as it is mediated through the existence of *Robinson Crusoe*, and the cultural, canonical tradition which it represents.

Yet in another sense, the *affiliative* project of *Foe* as a canonised postcolonial text may also be seen as the returning echo of the critical claims advanced by postcolonial theory. In this sense, *Foe*'s radical ending can in some ways also be read as a desperate attempt to break out of the particular discourse in which the text is situated; an attempt to break off the ambiguous relationship to its critical reception, or, in a figurative sense, to break *through* the arcade of its readings. Friday's otherness, and, by implication, the otherness of *Foe* as a literary text, is not an absolute otherness, but rather an otherness that seems to move *toward* representation and reconciliation, without actually reaching it; it remains an imaginary possibility, a utopian gesture, an arcade of foreignness but one that shelters many kinds of foreignness, including one's own, and, by implication, the foreignness of criticism. Echoing inside this arcade is Friday's silence which, during the last pages of the novel, moves beyond Susan Barton's voice, beyond Mr. Foe's voice, and beyond the last, unidentified narrator's voice; it moves toward its own voice, yet a voice that remains untranslatable in the novelistic language of *Foe*.

The early Lukács's notion of a 'realist ideal', as developed in *The Theory of the Novel*, defines literary form as an interpretational dynamic which to some extent 'rivals' other interpretational dynamics (e.g. criticism); a process of 'working-through', which, I would argue, also poses specific problems for any given theoretical discourse (including, as we have seen, Lukács's own), and in particular an increasingly *institutionalised* field such as the contemporary formation of postcolonial studies. If *Foe*, as a canonised modernist-postcolonial text, can be seen as a 'blocking' instead of a 'working-through' –

that is, as a text tracing and exploring the impossibility of representativity as such – it is also a text that *opens* itself up to the alleged radicality of postcolonial criticism by suspending the legitimacy of its own ‘rival’ interpretational perspective.

In the essay ‘Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism’, Fredric Jameson suggests

that all modernistic works are essentially simply cancelled realistic ones, that they are, in other words, not apprehended directly, in terms of their own symbolic meanings, in terms of their own mythic or sacred immediacy ... but rather indirectly only, by way of the relay of an imaginary realistic narrative of which the symbolic and modernistic one is then seen as a kind of stylization. (Jameson 1989b, 129)

If one for a moment ignores the characteristic generalisation in Jameson’s argument,<sup>40</sup> the idea of a ‘cancelled realism’ would find, I believe, certain resonances in the aesthetic project of Coetzee’s *Foe*. In another essay, ‘Modernism and Its Repressed; or, Robbe-Grillet as Anti-Colonialist’, Jameson argues that to repudiate modernist works ‘is simply to reconfirm the reified prestige, and as it were the sacred aura, of these fetishized names and reputations’; instead, Jameson argues that

What is needed is rather something on the order of the psychoanalytic *working through*, yet now on the level of political and ideological content ... only through such a process of dereification and of working-through can we restore something of the fragility and the pathos of aesthetic play as it stirs feebly and intermittently within the massive solidification of contemporary culture and media language. (Jameson 1989a, 179-180)

I have argued that this notion of ‘working-through’ must be seen as a process taking place *within* the literary text itself, that is, as the literary text’s specific, utopian-interpretive perspective. On this basis, I would argue that the notion of realism, as the early Lukács formulates it, could be seen as a kind of ‘zero degree of allegory’ (Jameson 1989b, 128), an ‘impulse’ or a ‘point of measure’ existing in literary texts to various extents.<sup>41</sup> The

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<sup>40</sup> For a critique of Jameson’s thesis in ‘Beyond the Cave’, see Eysteinnsson (1990); 206-209

<sup>41</sup> Lukács’s critique of the concept of allegory, or rather the modernist allegory (since his own interpretive framework is arguably equally allegorical, albeit in a different sense), is also one of the main reasons why he

allegorical voice of otherness haunting the last sentences of *Foe* can in some ways be seen as the utopian-interpretive perspective of the literary, a voice which cannot be formulated. The painstaking explorations of the ways in which this voice remains unheard, unvoiced, may be seen as *Foe*'s most radical gesture – that is, the demarcation of its own borders within which it remains trapped, paralysed, dreaming of a path which the novel, at the same time, must *refuse* to take. If *Foe*'s subversive project is established via the demarcation of its own borders, the novel must necessarily refuse to take this path, precisely because it would lead to the text that it has subverted, that is, *Robinson Crusoe*. Yet *Foe*'s subversive project may also be seen as one that is established not only via the exploration of its own aesthetic impossibility, but also as a way of avoiding taking risks, such as voicing otherness.<sup>42</sup> *Foe*'s exploration of the silences of *Robinson Crusoe* may thus be seen as a way of legitimising its own silences, its refusal take risks that may question and undermine its alleged radical project of subversion.<sup>43</sup> In a way, one could see *Foe* as a novel that traces the silences of *Robinson Crusoe* as a way of filling out the space of its own silences.

One could furthermore argue that insofar as Coetzee's text appears to reach the utmost limits of the potential of the literary, exploring the borders between the figures of the literary and modes of criticism, its actual radicality lies in the fact that such limits in fact have already been transgressed. The limits of the literary which *Foe* explores must also

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is generally dismissive of Franz Kafka's works; allegory, Lukács argues, 'bars Kafka's way to realism, prevents him from investing observed detail with typical significance' (Lukács 1979, 45).

<sup>42</sup> Interpretation involves responsibility in the sense that it fixates a specific kind of pattern or codification; *Foe* traces the very act of interpretive fixations, not only, one could argue, as a way of showing the illegitimacy of interpreting otherness, but also as a way of coming to terms with its own (or postcolonial studies') anxiety or paranoia about representing the other. The text masochistically explores its own impossible position, while thus at the same time legitimising its position, as it is authorised by its openness to postcolonial criticism.

<sup>43</sup> Within this perspective, one might see the theoretical dimension in *Foe* as similar to what Graham Huggan (in connection with the metalanguage of theory in postcolonial studies) has called 'a measure of ideological self-protection' (Huggan 2001, 259).

be seen as postcolonial criticism's limits. If the figures of the literary in some ways can be seen as postcolonial studies' uncanny doppelganger, as I argued in chapter one, a canonised text like *Foe* constitutes not so much the 'return of the repressed', as much as postcolonial studies' pre-emptive response to the symptom of melancholia. In a radically inverted way, *Foe*, as a canonised and institutionalised text, *becomes* postcolonial studies in disguise (as literature), and, by implication, literature's uncanny doppelganger – demonstrating, in a caricatured and mimic way, the limits and inadequacies of the potential of the otherness of literature, while simultaneously attempting to demonstrate the radicality and necessity of postcolonial studies as an affiliative, critical perspective.

I have been arguing that *Foe* as a canonised postcolonial novel may not only be read as a paradigmatic strategy of textual resistance, but also be seen as kind of blockage, a suspension – a writing back at the expense of working-through – in the sense that it enacts an exaggeratedly self-reflective, interpretive perspective which ideologically veils the fact that it *refuses* to interpret, or rather, that it defers the act of interpreting to its postcolonial reception. Interpretation involves risks, taking responsibility; *Foe*'s 'allegory of narrative strategies' can be seen as a project of 'double-safeguarding' its claims, a project anxiously exploring so many other strategies that it successfully eliminates the trace of its own strategy. The cul-de-sacs and dead-ends of *Foe*'s arcade evoke a sense of loss – the loss of the literary – which in another sense can also be seen as a melancholic desire, a projection, a pre-emptive response to the lack of radicality within the increasingly institutionalised discourse of postcolonial studies, in need of canonised texts like Coetzee's *Foe*, which may confirm and validate the field's claims to a radical identity.

## Chapter Six

### Realism in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

#### **Lukácsian Overtures**

Lukács argues in *The Theory of the Novel* that the novel form must have a 'strict, compositional and architectural significance' in order to constitute a meaningful, conceptual totality, which, however, does not mean that every element and heterogeneous part must fit into a perfect, symmetrical pattern; such a structure would be profoundly inauthentic and inartistic since it would not generate that particular dialectic of ironic forces and counter-forces striving toward a point of immediacy and non-interpretation, which the young Lukács sees as unique for the novel as an aesthetic medium. Rather, as we have seen, Lukács's argument about the compositional form of the novel is that the events and parts must not be represented as mere decoration or as filler, but must occupy positions at which

they receive a particular meaning as defined in relation to the overall structure.<sup>1</sup> One might be led to believe that such a structure would lead to the homogenisation and unification of a particular idea; the novel's strict compositional form, however, only designates the first step within a dialectic process – an abstract architecture subsequently undermined and subverted through irony, revealing the inadequacy of any interpretational schematic. From this arduous dialectic trajectory, a temporal insight is produced, which is also a *realist* ideal, a transient form of experience that 'rubs the sharp edges off each heterogeneous fragment and establishes a relationship – albeit an irrational and inexpressible one – between them' (Lukács 2003, 125). What the novel form does, then, is to interpret a string of events as causally related, while balancing, objectifying or correcting this interpretation through irony, that is, the subversion of those events inferred to be causally related; and it is through this dialectic that the novel form is able to strive for the transcendence of both its abstractness and its subversion, producing a temporal perspective in which events reverberate on their own, establishing relations between one another, echoing and mirroring each other in an unauthorised, and ultimately unformulable and indefinable pattern that merges the novel's abstractly connected and disconnected parts and events into an imagined totality.

Relations, strings, balance; these aspects play a major role in Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance*, first published in 1995, which represents perhaps one of the most

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<sup>1</sup> In his famous comparison of two apparently similar scenes in Zola's *Nana* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, each depicting a horse race, Lukács writes in the article 'Narrate or Describe?' that in the case of the former, 'for all its virtuosity the description is mere filler in the novel. The events are loosely related to the plot and could easily be eliminated; the sole connection arises from the fact that one of Nana's many fleeting lovers is ruined in the swindle' (Lukács 1978, 110). In contrast, Tolstoy uses the race not as a mere tableau, 'but rather [as] a series of intensely dramatic scenes which provide a turning point in the plot' (111). Lukács's critique of Zola's naturalism in terms of its lack of 'narration' is, I would argue, a somewhat logical extension of the way in which he understands the dynamic of the novel form in his earlier work *Theory of the Novel*, but also, as I have argued, a problematic extension which fixates novelistic dynamic within a dogmatic extra-literary discourse.

unashamedly explicit examples of the workings of contemporary postcolonial realism.<sup>2</sup> The historical framework of the novel spans eleven years, from 1975-1984, set in Bombay during Indira Gandhi's state of emergency. Indira Gandhi, as the leader of the party 'The Indian National Congress', first became prime minister of India in 1966; nine years later, when she was declared guilty of electoral corruption by the high court in 1975, she was reluctant to retreat, which caused mass demonstrations and unrest in the country. That same year, Gandhi strategically declared the state-of-emergency,<sup>3</sup> as a pretext to stay in power, which lasted until 1977, when she lost the elections to the Janata Coalition Party, and subsequently accepted her defeat.<sup>4</sup> In 1980, she succeeded in becoming India's prime minister again, but was assassinated by her own bodyguards in 1984, when *A Fine Balance* ends.<sup>5</sup>

These historical events constitute the background of Mistry's novel, which depicts four individual characters – the Parsi widow Dina Dalal; the Parsi student Maneck Kohlah; the Hindu tailor Ishvar; and his nephew Omprakash – whose life stories the novel skilfully weaves together like strings in a huge, panoramic patchwork quilt (which also constitutes one of the text's dominant metaphors). The novel balances the disruptive forces generated

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<sup>2</sup> Rohinton Mistry immigrated at the age of twenty-three from India to Canada, where he has lived ever since. *A Fine Balance* was published about twenty years after his immigration, when Mistry was about forty-three (Mistry was born in 1952 and the novel was published in 1995); the fact that the author immigrated the same year Indira Gandhi's state of emergency began (1975) also means that he did not 'witness' the historical events evoked in the novel at first hand.

<sup>3</sup> The state of emergency involved a series of totalitarian government regulations and initiatives such as strict censorship; the arrest of opposition leaders, union activists and radical critics; suspension of human rights and civil liberties; the brutal 'Beautification' of the streets; 'family planning' which meant forced sterilisation (in a deluded attempt to keep down India's booming population, particularly among the poorer classes); as well as other series of extreme measures benefiting the wealthier classes and the economic and industrial modes of production. For an historical overview of the state of emergency, see Siddarth Dube (1988); 105-106

<sup>4</sup> Although Indira Gandhi is never named in *A Fine Balance* (just like the city by the sea in Mistry's text is never named as Bombay), the novel is built around very specific and easily identifiable historical events.

<sup>5</sup> Indira Gandhi was killed by her bodyguards (who were Sikhs), apparently as an act of revenge because she had ordered the desecration of a holy Sikh temple, The Golden Temple in Amritsar, and the murder of the religious Sikh leader Jarnail Bhindranwale in 1984; her death caused a counter-revenge act, the killing of thousand of Sikhs.

by the state of emergency and the experiences of hope, desire and tragedy at the individual level, evoking a very concrete sense of the historical era during which these four characters toil and struggle through everyday life, constantly obstructed and regulated by what appears to be an endless series of accidents, coincidences and random forces.

Indeed, accidents play a significant part in Mistry's realist vision, as scales constantly tipping the balance of existence. 'Without chance', Lukács writes in the 1936-article 'Narrate or Describe?', 'all narration is dead and abstract. No writer can portray life if he eliminates the fortuitous', an argument that could easily be applied to Mistry's state of emergency narrative. More troublesome for Mistry's novel, however, would be Lukács's immediate qualification that 'On the other hand, in his representation of life he must go beyond crass accident and elevate chance to the inevitable' (Lukács 1978, 112). Stretching the quote slightly, one could see it as a crude summarising of the trajectory of Lukács's critical work, from *The Theory of the Novel* to his realist writings of the thirties; the young Lukács would probably not disagree fundamentally with the first part of the quote, while the latter part – the necessity of elevating chance to the inevitable – remains an *ideal* in *The Theory*. In 'Narrate or Describe?' it has become the critical *norm*, the hallmark of 'serious' literature.<sup>6</sup> One would be mistaken, however, to say that the later Lukács is simply being *wrong* as much as being dogmatically *blind* to the problems involved in fixating this ideal as a critical norm – fixating, that is, to the extent that the *potential* of the literary, what I have seen as its interpretive-utopian process, is in danger; to define the potential of the literary in terms of a critical, extra-literary norm also transfers authority or legitimacy to the

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<sup>6</sup> In 'Narrate or Describe?', Lukács, for example, writes: 'In narration the writer must move with the greatest deftness between past and present so that the reader may grasp the real causality of the epic events. And only the experience of this causality can communicate the sense of a real chronological, concrete, historical sequence' (Lukács 1978, 133). Here, the 'epic', which remains an unattainable ideal in *The Theory of the Novel*, has become the critical norm for contemporary writers.



critical activity, as I argued earlier. The Lukács of the thirties, enmeshed in party politics,<sup>7</sup> had a distinct, political motivation regarding the formulation of a concrete literary potential, which to some extent explains the rigorous and dogmatic way in which he transforms his reflections from *The Theory*. At the same time, this transformation also reflects what can be seen as the later Lukács's attempt to de-reify and historicise *The Theory*'s abstract utopian-reconciliatory formalism, as a necessary measure in a historical epoch increasingly out of balance – that is, a historical epoch designating not so much 'the fragility of the world' as much as the reifying and repressive force of capitalism.<sup>8</sup>

The important thing here is however to learn from the Lukácsian trajectory at a time when the contemporary field of postcolonial studies has become increasingly dogmatic and prescriptive, particularly as reflected through its ambiguous relationship to the literary. Mistry's text (as well as its postcolonial readings) provides us with an opportunity to recuperate some of the valuable insights as formulated in *The Theory of the Novel* and, in a more indirect sense, Lukács's realist writings, with regards to the dimension of the literary – valuable perhaps particularly within the context of contemporary postcolonial studies, as I will go on to show.

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of Lukács's intellectual and political activities in the thirties, see Arpad Kardakay's *Georg Lukács: Life Thought, and Politics*; 297-359

<sup>8</sup> In *The Theory of the Novel*, 'disillusion' refers, in abstract-metaphysical terms, to an 'interiority denied the possibility of fulfilling itself in action [which thus] turns inwards, yet cannot finally renounce what it has lost forever ... life forces it to continue the struggle and suffer defeats which the artist anticipates and the hero apprehends' (Lukács 2003, 118). Compare this conception of 'disillusion' with the later Lukács, to whom 'Modern bourgeois literature bears witness against bourgeois society. Its predilection for certain themes – disappointment and disillusion – is evidence of such rebellion. Every novel of disillusion is the history of the failure of such a rebellion. But such rebellions are conceived superficially and thus lack impact' (Lukács 1978, 145). He continues: 'That capitalism is now perfected does not mean, of course, that everything henceforth is fixed and finished or that there is no more struggle or development in the life of the individual. The "perfection" of the capitalist system merely means that it reproduces itself on ever higher levels of "perfected" inhumanity. But the system reproduces itself continuously, and this process is in reality a series of bitter and implacable struggles – a process evolving simultaneously in the life of the individual, who is transformed into a soulless appurtenance of the capitalist system though he had not come into the world "naturally" as such' (145-146).

## Accidents and History

*A Fine Balance* begins with three interrelated accidents or coincidences. During a train journey, Maneck Kohlah accidentally drops his study books upon someone's back, the Hindu tailor Omprakash; stumbling together coincidentally in an overcrowded train, they are surprised to discover a little later that they are heading toward the same address, Dina Dalal's apartment – Maneck to rent a room, Om and his uncle Ishvar to work as tailors. The reason for Maneck accidentally dropping his books is the train suddenly coming to a halt. A body is found on the tracks: “‘Maybe it has to do with the Emergency,’” said someone’ (Mistry 1997, 5) – that is, the state of emergency which the prime minister has announced on the radio earlier that very same day. Nobody among the train passengers is sure what the ‘state of emergency’ really means, except that it is ‘Something about country being threatened from inside’ (ibid.) – and that this event may be related to the ‘accident’ on the railway tracks,<sup>9</sup> which causes the train to a sudden halt, and which then again causes Maneck accidentally to drop his books upon Om's back, whereby the three characters accidentally meet for the first time and initiate a friendship.<sup>10</sup> The historical event of the state of emergency here apparently constitutes little else than a blurred background no one, at the individual level, seems to take much notice of, yet which embodies an uncertain initiator of a chain of causally related accidents; that is, the state of emergency is at this

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<sup>9</sup> Thus, echoing Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the body found on the tracks forebodes the end, when Maneck commits suicide by throwing himself in front of a train, as well as the body of Avinash which is found on the tracks (to make it look like an accident), a body clearly bearing the marks of torture.

<sup>10</sup> Characteristically, what brings them together is their mutual homelessness, being strangers in the city. Throughout the novel, a constant motif is home-sickness, and dreams of returning home, yet none of them ever returns home permanently again.

particular level no more than a random, accidental force disrupting people's lives, 'the cause of their delay' (6).<sup>11</sup>

This is not to say that History as such (or, its concrete embodiment as the state of emergency) constitutes an accidental force in Mistry's novel, but rather to stress the way in which it is experienced *differently* at the individual-human level. Laws and controlling instances are at work everywhere in the novel, but we never get a clear, concrete and unified sense of power; rather it operates in dispersed forms, embodied and manifested through representatives and agents, seeping through relations at all levels in society.<sup>12</sup> This 'effect' of dispersion is also related to the way in which the historical dimension operates in the novel; the meaning of the historical paradigm framing the text and its characters is to some extent separate from the level of individual experience. Coincidences, random events, and accidents (or what appear to be accidents) constitute a large part of the novel's mechanisms of cohesion, the bolts and screws that fasten the text's events together, suggesting that the two levels – the trans-individual level (History) and the level of individual, quotidian experience – are inextricably intertwined without thereby becoming

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<sup>11</sup> The scene with the body causing a delay of the commuter train reveals, at a symbolic level, the contradictions generated by the impatient force underlying the state of emergency. As Peter Morey, commenting on this scene, writes: 'The equation of the railway with a preferred form of death is an instantly striking metaphor for a nation that runs over the people while, itself, going "off the rails"' (Morey 2000, 175). Trains and railways of course metaphorically refer to connectivity and linking, but the body causing delay also becomes a figure of the opposite; the breaking of human relations, the suspension of individual connectivity, as well as the suspension of causality as such (e.g. causal explanatory power).

<sup>12</sup> Power works both at a concrete level – e.g. as the dispersed forms of power measures terrorising Om and Ishvar – and at a symbolic level, for example through the political propaganda machine constantly emerging on each street corner. The fragility of the symbolic manifestation of power becomes evident in one of the novel's more comic scenes, during which Om and Ishvar are forced to listen to one of the prime minister's political rallies. Accompanying the prime minister is a gigantic cardboard version of herself, which begins to sway violently when a helicopter drops leaflets (about the Twenty-Point Programme) and rose petals: 'But the Prime Minister's eighty-foot cutout began to sway in the tempest of the helicopter's blades. The crowd shouted in alarm ... The cutout started to topple slowly, face forward. Those in the vicinity of the cardboard-and-plywood giant ran for their lives' (Mistry 1997, 267).

identical or symmetrically overlapping.<sup>13</sup> The *difference* (which is also a force of irony) between those two levels – as a consequence – seems to be unable to escape its figuration as something coincidental or accidental in the novelistic discourse (despite being subjected to the regulative laws of the state of emergency).<sup>14</sup> And it is precisely this difference which shapes, or even allows, *A Fine Balance*'s novelistic or literary interpretation to emerge, both as a symptom of this problematic and as its symbolic resolution.

When Ishvar asks Dina what the state of emergency actually means, she answers:

'Government problems – games played by people in power. It doesn't affect ordinary people like us' (75). And yet the whole novel is about how the intricate and indecipherable pattern of History – 'government problems' – embroils its strings around the fates of the

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<sup>13</sup> The historical dimension in Mistry's novel has generated some debate among critics. Nilufer E. Bharucha has criticised Mistry's novel because it apparently does not integrate history in a proper way: 'While Mistry has to be appreciated for trying to magnify the scope of his narratives and making them take in a wider Indian reality, there is a heavy price he has paid for moving away from his ethnocentric discourse ... the novel itself appears to have been pieced together from fragments of newspaper reports, with the author riffling through pages of old newspapers from 1977 to 1986' (Bharucha 2003, 167). While Bharucha praises Mistry for having magnified the historical scope (but magnified in an inadequate way), Robert L. Ross has questioned whether 'the exposé of political corruption and tyranny during Indira Gandhi's tenure still hold that much interest?' (Ross 1999, 240). Commenting on this passage in Ross's article, Beverly Schneller disagrees 'with Ross's assumption that the incorporation of accurate historical information fails to attract readers. Ross appears to suggest that in Mistry's latest novel [*A Fine Balance*], history can be separated from the fiction, which I contend it cannot' (Schneller 2001, 242-243). I agree with Schneller here, but one does understand Ross's and Bharucha's concerns; the problematic which Mistry's text explores, I would argue, is the link between the forces of History on the one hand, and on the other hand the toils and struggles of everyday life. That these two dimensions are inextricably linked is beyond doubt but how these two dimensions are linked remains *abstract* – an abstractness which precisely is thematised and concretised in Mistry's novel. One should equally see the novel's relatively sparse, yet significant, references to India's colonial past in this light, that is, as part of the way in which History as such is incorporated and concretised in Mistry's text.

<sup>14</sup> The novel elaborates a notion of History that is similar to what one may call an 'absent cause', in the Jamesonian sense: 'history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious' (Jameson 2002a, 20). Furthermore, this conception of History, as an absent cause, also means that the social totality consists of elements which on the one hand are interrelated, but related 'by way of their structural *difference* and distance from one another, rather than by their ultimate identity' (26) – ultimate identity here referring to Hegelian notions of 'expressive causality'. 'Difference', Jameson continues (in his interpretation of Althusser), 'is then here understood as a relational concept, rather than as the mere inert inventory of unrelated diversity' (ibid.).

four characters;<sup>15</sup> Om and Ishvar ending up as beggars, Dina becoming the servant in her brother's house after losing the apartment (and thereby losing her independence), while Maneck kills himself. In none of these cases do we find a clear or direct link between a trans-individual, historical force and the outcome of a character's life, yet neither is such a link entirely absent; it remains, however, an abstract relation for much of the novel, and which occasionally – in circumscribed moments – breaks through in the form of random acts of political violence, demonstrations, or government initiatives (like the sterilisation campaign, the beautification programme etc.).<sup>16</sup> When Dina is on her way to a music shop to sell Rustom's old violin, she 'had to duck inside a library while demonstrators rampaged briefly through the street, breaking store windows and shouting slogans against the influx of South Indians into the city who were stealing their jobs' (61-62); Dina waits a few moments, no further comment on the episode is given, and the story moves on to the sale of the violin in the music shop. A little later she starts her sewing business in the apartment, hiring two people who have migrated to the city to find jobs; there are countless examples of similar, tacit yet ironic, constellations in the novel during which the political-historical dimension briefly makes an uncommented and relatively un-disturbing appearance, with implications that are only felt or made explicit at some later stage.

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<sup>15</sup> The historical force, at the level of the individual, is one that imposes itself on the characters, like some kind of Orwellian Big Brother. Peter Morey sees the historical dimension of the text in terms of 'the gargantuan body of Mrs Gandhi' (Morey 2000, 180). Beverly Schneller reads the historical force of the state of emergency as 'a Hydra-like [sic] occurrence, in which the tentacles of government reached across the entire subcontinent, destroying lives in its wake' (Schneller 2001, 243).

<sup>16</sup> While history is shaped and formed by the ones at the top of the social hierarchy, its effects are most powerful upon the ones at the lowest step of the hierarchy – as represented for example, through the characters of Om and Ishvar, as well as Rajaram, the Monkey Man, Shankar, and the rent collector Ibrahim. Their concerns remain of the most rudimentary kind – to eat, find a place to sleep, to find work – and the motivations of their actions and doings remain limited to these concerns, which at the same time constitute the framework of possibilities of narrative motivation for much of the novel; it is through the obstruction of these rudimentary motivations that history, among the lower classes, manifests itself.

## Superfluity, Interpretation, Causes

Ian Almond has emphasised the frequent appearance of what he calls the 'superfluity of the incident' (Almond 2004, 206) in Mistry's text. As an example, Almond focuses on the episode just after the thugs or 'goondas' have trashed Dina's apartment; a stench fills the apartment, which later turns out to stem from Dina's shoe (she has stepped in something outside). Almond comments:

She cleans it off, the story moves on. The vignette seems somehow unconnected with the surrounding developments, unstitched (to follow the book's metaphor) to the complex fabric of the novel, until we realize that the unrelatedness of the incident is precisely the author's point ... there is no single source of evil responsible for the myriad difficulties Mistry's characters suffer. Whether it is dog-dirt on the streets or goondas on the doorstep, difficulties rain down upon the characters from all sides ... In this sense, the reticence and sparseness of Mistry's prose signifies a reluctance to stitch and blend the novel's vicissitudes into a single diatribe, a single cry against a single foe. (ibid.)<sup>17</sup>

The banality of the example, its vulgar meaninglessness, resists any elaborate effort to interpret it within a larger context. The text is full of repetitive events, motifs and gestures of a banal, meaningless nature, for example when Dina Dalal accidentally drops a shoe in the gutter while crossing some rotten planks to Nawaz's place; some hundred pages later, Om's foot almost crashes through the same rotten planks (Mistry 1997, 68 & 153).<sup>18</sup>

Another recurrent type of accidents, still apparently meaningless, yet of a more sinister

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<sup>17</sup> Almond's point could here be seen as similar to the one Roland Barthes makes in the essay 'The Reality Effect', in which he draws attention to the presence of 'those details which are "superfluous"' (Barthes 1992, 135) in realist texts. Another thing characterising the realist text, Barthes argues, is its dependence on a certain redundancy or repetition that guarantees its readability, and which produces the 'reality effect' (the habitual travails and patterns of everyday life). One could see the superfluity of details as correlating with the realist text's dependence on redundancy, but, as Eric Downing points out in his reading of Barthes's poetics, 'the realist's hypertrophic evocation of discrete details is intent on challenging, on *resisting*, meaning: on opposing functional assimilation to the established systems of intelligibility, whether these be conceived as primarily literary or as more broadly sociocultural' (Downing 2000, 3).

<sup>18</sup> Another bizarre, recurrent and apparently meaningless vignette is the one involving animals fighting over sweets. For example, a dog eats the ice cream that Rustom bought just before he was hit by a truck: 'A stray dog lapped at the thick pink puddle near the bicycle ... A policeman kicked the sand-coloured mongrel' (Mistry 1997, 45). A gull eats Om's sugar cane: 'It investigated thoroughly, refusing to believe its beak was not up to tackling sugar cane' (191). And finally, after being harassed by the police, Om drops a candy-floss, quickly grabbed by a street dog: 'The fluff stuck to its muzzle. The animal worried the pink beard with a paw, and a child in the truck, sitting on its mother's lap, laughed at the creature's antics' (531).

character, is the traffic accident; Dina's husband Rustom is randomly killed when he is hit by a truck; likewise, Omprakash is hit by a car when he attempts to follow Dina Dalal to the place from where she collects the raw material for the dresses; and when Maneck arrives to his college for the first time, he sees an old man who has been hit by a bus (45 & 189 & 234).<sup>19</sup> One is tempted to agree with Ian Almond's conclusion – that the unrelatedness of the incident is the author's point; on the other hand, one may also say that it is precisely the impossibility to uphold a clear distinction between possibly motivated events (that is, events with a specific relational or causal significance) and random, redundant events, which on the one hand produces a sense of unrelatedness, but also, on the other hand, points at the underlying conditions for the production of this sense *in the first place*.

What emerges is a pattern of a historical framework haunted by randomness; a framework which cannot overcome its abstractness, and thus cannot become truthful, self-evident. The concrete meaning of the historical force which frames the characters' lives is, on the surface, separate from the concrete doings and actions at the quotidian level; underneath the surface, however, its effects are present in almost all of the events narrated, but notably as mediated through an ironic or contradictory series of transformative and transforming parts, joints and sequences; at the quotidian-individual level, it is difficult, if

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<sup>19</sup> A third 'type' of accidents throws suspicion, in a political sense, on the dimension of the accidental as such; Avinash's death, for example, is officially classified as a 'railway accident' (thus reminding us of the railway accident in the prologue), but the body reveals that he has been tortured to death. When Maneck meets Avinash's parents, the father says: 'We saw burns on many shameful parts of his body, and when his mother picked up his hand to press it to her forehead, we could see that his fingernails were gone. So we asked them in the morgue, how can this happen in falling from a train? They said anything can happen' (Mistry 1997, 499). And after the police's brutal treatment of Ashraf, of which he dies, the hospital declares 'the cause of death as accidental' (538). A fourth 'type' of the accidental, no less political, includes events suddenly bestowed with an allegorical dimension, such as when a market is suddenly destroyed by the police: 'In seconds the square was littered with tomatoes, onions, earthen pots, flour, spinach, coriander, chillies – patches of orange and white and green, dissolving in chaos out of their neat rows' (529). As Peter Morey observes, the colours of the down-trodden vegetables are 'the colours of the Indian flag' (Morey 2000, 181).

not impossible, to trace these effects back to their original cause, except in an abstract sense – as the episode in the prologue demonstrates, when the body is found on the tracks, an accident which *may* be related to the state of the emergency but which has concrete consequences involving both tragedy at an individual level, as well as delaying the train. In almost all of the characters' trajectories, it is possible to relate – in an abstract sense – the causes of the particular bends, creases and folds in their life stories to a grand narrative of India's post-independence history – economically, politically and culturally. The Kohlah family, peacefully running a store at the foothills of the Himalayas, is threatened by 'the broad vision of nation-builders and World Bank officials' (215), which means 'the transmogrification' of Mr. Kohlah's 'beloved birthplace where his forefathers had lived as in paradise' (216), and which furthermore causes the father to send his son Maneck to the big city to get a university degree. Likewise, Om and Ishvar are eventually led to the big city because a new ready-made clothing store opens in their town. Ashraf, the owner of the tailor shop in which Om and Ishvar work, is bemused by the unstoppable source providing their competitor: "'Strange, isn't it," said Ashraf. "Something I've never even seen is ruining the business I have owned for forty years... I mean the factories in the city. How big are they? Who owns them? What do they pay? None of this I know, except that they are begging us'" (150).<sup>20</sup> After Rustom's premature death, Dina struggles to maintain her economic independence, ruining her eyes on sewing work until she starts a business by employing Om and Ishvar to make dresses of raw material supplied by Mrs Gupta's export firm. Dina is eventually forced out of her apartment by the landlord who wants to turn the

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<sup>20</sup> Mrs. Gupta, the owner of the export firm, explicitly tells Dina that Au Revoir's 'patterns were top secret' (Mistry 1997, 66), and that they must not be shown to anyone except the tailors. When Om and Ishvar start working for Dina, Om tries to find out from where Dina gets her raw material, but fails; thus, he and his uncle are no wiser than Ashraf after they have come to the city, and eventually, in a literal sense, they involuntarily *confirm* what Ashraf *does* know; that the big cloth factories 'are begging us'.



valuable building into luxury apartments; she reluctantly moves back to her brother, the businessman Nusswan, whose business has profited from the policies of the state of emergency.<sup>21</sup> In all these cases it would be possible to inscribe their miseries and toils into a larger framework of global capitalism, as Peter Morey observes:

all characters and relationships are affected by the machinations of the capitalist economy: from the piece-working tailors and their well-intentioned employer Dina, who is nonetheless implicated as an exploiter of cheap, non-unionized labour ... to the beggars whose place in the warped economy of beggary is determined by the severity of their mutilation ... [It] emphasizes the text's interest in moral culpability and the impossibility of total insulation against the taint of money in a society where anything or anyone can be bought and sold. This is not to say that Mistry is nostalgic for some idealized, pre-capitalist rural society. He recognizes that the roots of India's problems lie also in the concept of caste, and portrays rural society as often brutal and superstitious. (Morey 2000, 181-182)<sup>22</sup>

But within this interpretational framework the question emerges as to what significance the 'superfluity of the incident' exactly plays, that is, the unrelatedness to which I referred above; if the novel produces a sense of unrelatedness while also at the same time points at the underlying reasons that produce this sense, how should we read the text's inscription in a larger, allegorical-historical framework of 'the machinations of the capitalist economy'?

It is not so much because the novel does *not* suggest that such links should be made – that the root of evil should not be identified in the final analysis – quite the contrary; as we have seen, the novel itself readily provides us with particular frameworks in which we can insert individual events. Yet, to suggest that the novel 'shows' how global mechanisms impact the individual level in postcolonial India involves a leap which precisely cuts out

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<sup>21</sup> As representatives of the businesspeople, Nusswan and Mrs. Gupta at every opportunity express their support for the radical measures of the government during the state of emergency; Nusswan even apes extreme opinions, such as eliminating 'at least two hundred million' beggars and homeless that 'are surplus to requirements' by feeding 'them a free meal containing arsenic or cyanide, whichever is cost-effective' (Mistry 1997, 372-373).

<sup>22</sup> See also Tyler Tokaryk's essay 'Keynes, Storytelling, and Realism: Literary and Economic Discourse in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*', which analyses the novel in the context of the economic development of India after its independence (and the links between economic discourse and literary discourse), as well as Pramod K. Nayar's essay 'The Text(ure) of Cruelty: Power and Violence in *A Fine Balance*' for a discussion of the discursive power relations in the novel and the violence these relations generate.

another aspect which is also at stake in Mistry's novel, as a *literary* text, namely the exploration of the (im)-possibility of positing such links in the first place, and, by implication, the (im)-possibility as well as necessity of shaping such links into social critique.<sup>23</sup> The way in which such a trajectory – or linking – is to be mapped so that it becomes effective as a critique of power, is also somehow what the novel's narrative economy refuses to render – what remains confusing, missing, what is lost; what ultimately remains un-reconstructable, unformulable and indefinable.

When Dina asks Valmik why the Supreme Court 'turns the Prime Minister's guilt into innocence', he answers:

Who knows why, madam. Why is there disease and starvation and suffering? We can only answer the how and the where and the when of it. The Prime Minister cheats in the election, and the relevant law is promptly modified. *Ergo*, she is not guilty. We poor mortals have to accept that bygone events are beyond our clutch, while the Prime Minister performs juggling acts with time past. (Mistry 1997, 563)

Quoting this particular passage, Peter Morey comments that it sums up the 'central absurdity' of the historical situation: 'A nation which does not learn from the oppressions of the colonial past seems doomed to repeat them' (Morey 2000, 182). I would not fundamentally disagree with this reading, only add that it also, at the same time, strategically leaves out or even represses another problematic evoked in this passage, namely the radical *disjunction* of socio-historical levels that precisely undermines the legitimacy of establishing such an interpretation in the first place. That the interpretation of

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<sup>23</sup> One may argue that the textual dynamic consists of a series of what *might* be motivated events, but events that do not possess the authority to be translated into a certain chain of motivation, except in an abstract sense. This, it would seem, is one of the *literary* ways in which the political-historical dimension works and is explored in Mistry's novel. At the quotidian-individual level, the narrated events take on a 'functional' appearance, in the Russian formalist sense of the term, that is, as events primarily orientated toward the *outcome* or the *consequences*; one cause may be replaced with another, but the consequences carry actual, concrete signification, while the meaning of the event itself takes on an accidental appearance. As the novel progresses, the accumulative force of the narrative unfolding eventually achieves a certain authoritative gravity which translates, retrospectively (that is, when all the novel's many warnings, expectations, omens, forebodings, hopes, dreams, desires, fears etc., have either been confirmed, de-confirmed, fulfilled or unfulfilled), particular events into a particular chain of motivation.

the historical force as it affects the individual, human level, is forced into an abstract generalisation (say, 'the main problem identified in the novel is global capitalism or the caste system') because the novel explicitly disembodies the two levels, is also a way of showing the ineffectiveness and rhetoricity of such an endeavour. One may see an allegorical representation of this kind of ineffective interpretive endeavour in the figure of Mr. Valmik; a figure that not only absorbs much of the rhetorical excess of the novel, but also, at a meta-level, becomes the unflattering mirror image of the literary critic who mimics Mr. Valmik's 'high-flown manner' (Mistry 1997, 563) and grandiose abstractions (as well as mimicking his fate near the end of the novel as the assistant to the fake prophet Bal Baba, previously known as Rajaram the hair collector), while Dina, Mr. Valmik's listener, feels increasingly irritated, because although his analysis of the condition of the nation may 'ring true' (564), it helps little in her struggle to keep the apartment, i.e. it changes little in terms of the actual, concrete toils and misfortunes of individual people's meandering lives.

### **Antibodies and Blood**

If Valmik's high-flown rhetoric does not in the end save Dina's apartment, this does not mean that he is merely to be seen as the false prophet's messenger. His words *do* 'ring true' in Dina's ears; but what bestows Valmik's speech with truthfulness, however abstract, ambiguous or imitative? What kind of authority ultimately distinguishes the picaresque lawyer's insights from ineffective ramblings?

The dialogue between Dina and Valmik outside the court house constitutes a kind of meta-reflective miniature allegory of the overall dynamic of the novel. Valmik narrates 'life

as a sequence of accidents'; at the same time we are told that there 'was nothing accidental about his expert narration. His sentences poured out like perfect seams, holding the garment of his story together without calling attention to the stitches' (565). The act of telling, Dina reflects while listening to Valmik, seems to create 'a natural design. Perhaps it was a knack that humans had, for cleaning up their untidy existences – a hidden survival weapon, like antibodies in the bloodstream' (ibid.). Valmik's words – however abstract – 'ring true' to Dina, because she is able to 'balance' their abstract truth with the experiences of her own lived life: 'Here he goes again, she thought. But his words did ring true. She tested them against her own experience. Random events controlled everything' (564).

This 'balanced truth' also designates what one could see as an effect of the 'workings' of *A Fine Balance*'s novelistic dynamic; a dynamic in which two different yet mutually conditioning dimensions – Valmik's 'abstract truth' and the truth of Dina's 'concrete experiences' – achieve a certain symmetry, a 'natural design' (or 'hidden survival weapon'). The essential point here is that it is only insofar as these two dimensions *interact* with each other that a 'balanced truth' emerges. Neither dimension can be seen as truthful in and for itself. Valmik's reflections do not reveal the truth of Dina's experience; nor does Dina's experience constitute the truth, reiterated or articulated by Valmik. Seen independently, they constitute a symptom of the absence of truth as such. It would be mistaken, for example, to understand Valmik's reflections as summing up the meaning of the novel as such.<sup>24</sup> By holding these two dimensions up against each other, like antibodies and blood, or like dialectical counter-forces, the novel develops a framework of meaning

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<sup>24</sup> Several critical essays see Mr. Valmik as some kind of sage, summing up the philosophy of the novel, while failing to note Dina's mixed feelings about the lawyer's speech: 'It had been entertaining for a while but was rapidly becoming wearisome. How people loved to make speeches, she thought. Bombast and rhetoric infected the nation, from ministers to lawyers, rent-collectors to hair-collectors' (Mistry 1997, 563).

which seeks to combine disjointed, separate levels; for example, the lawyer's speech reminds Dina in a symbolic way 'of her languishing patchwork quilt' (565), just as one may assume that Dina's sewing would have reminded Valmik of his rhetorical abstractions.<sup>25</sup>

Moving from this meta-reflective scene to the novel as a whole, one may argue that *A Fine Balance*'s novelistic dynamic produces a narrative form in which a series of events are implicitly inferred to be causally – and hence truthfully – related; yet it is an act of inference which in actuality has no absolute truth-value as such. The 'truth' of the novelistic dynamic does *not* mean that the series of events implicitly inferred to be causally related in fact *are* causally related in an absolute way, since the randomness of the events ironically cancels out this possibility in advance. Rather, the novelistic dynamic must be seen as simultaneously constituting an abstract, interpretive schematic (an 'ethic' of regulative or formal laws), and a balancing structure of concrete events, through which it dialectically strives for a resolution of the contradictions in between the disjointed dimensions.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the novelistic dynamic of *A Fine Balance* should be seen both as a *symptom* of the existence of contradictions between disjointed dimensions (each operating

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<sup>25</sup> It is important not to confuse Valmik's abstract reflections with what I have referred to as the 'abstractness' of History as such; History is abstract because it cannot be grasped or represented except in textual form (which, however, as Fredric Jameson has pointed out, does not mean that History as such is a text). The textuality of history is fundamentally an interpretation or a representation of History, which precisely is intended to transform the abstractness of History into a representable form; yet this interpretation or representation is equally in need of balancing its own abstractness, in order to become truthful. The novelistic dynamic in Mistry's text can be seen as one that attempts to unify or combine the dimensions of abstract truth and concrete experience – that is, forming two irreconcilable perspectives – into one inseparable unity which generates glimpses of the transcendence of abstraction, albeit in a conceptual sense. In the postcolonial context of *A Fine Balance*, the necessity of such a perspective is also, I would argue, what constitutes one of the reasons for the importance of the *literary*.

<sup>26</sup> E.g., as Fredric Jameson has observed, contradictions 'between the public and the private, between the social and the psychological, or the political and the poetic, between history or society and the "individual," which – the tendential law of social life under capitalism – maims our existence as individual subjects and paralyzes our thinking about time and change just as surely as it alienates us from our speech itself' (Jameson 2002a, 4).

according to their own set of laws and rules), but also as the dialectic attempt to *resolve* them symbolically, or formally, in a world out of balance; a symbolic resolution conveying sense of truth and hope, a ‘natural design’, or, a ‘hidden survival weapon’.

### Games and Laws

Aesthetic form becomes a ‘hidden survival weapon’ when laws do not operate according to absolute principles, but rather operate like arbitrary scales in a world out of balance, such as Mistry’s state of emergency-epoch. ‘The epic world’, in contrast, writes Lukács,

is either a purely childlike one in which the transgression of stable, traditional norms has to entail vengeance which again must be avenged *ad infinitum*, or else it is the perfect theodicy in which crime and punishment lie in the scales of the world justice as equal, mutually homogeneous weights. (Lukács 2003, 61)

In Mistry’s text, the Law, as legislated and enforced by representatives of Indira Gandhi’s government policy, is ‘a grim, unsmiling thing’ (Mistry 1997, 566), as members of the lower classes constantly experience,<sup>27</sup> while the high court has become ‘a museum of cheap tricks, rather than the living, breathing law that strengthens the sinews of society’ (562).

A recurrent figure in the text is the Law being aligned with rules in a game. To the Beggarmaster, for example, the state of emergency has ‘become a game, like all other laws. Easy to play, once you know the rules’ (379). Although apparently operating on the other side of the official Law, ‘his laws ... are no different from those enforced by the state

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<sup>27</sup> During the state of emergency, a series of juridical restrictions are being carried out. On a plaque attached to a stone statue, symbolising freedom, ‘Small print explained why fundamental rights had been temporarily suspended’ (Mistry 1997, 191). When the inhabitants of the slum quarter – the jhopadpattis – ask why the government can destroy their homes, ‘just like that’, someone answers: ‘They said it’s a new Emergency law. If shacks are illegal, they can remove them. The new law says the city must be made beautiful’ (295). A little later, the owner of a small stall on a street corner says: ‘With the Emergency, everything is upside-down. Black can be made white, day turned into night’ (299).

through the police, politicians, or courts' (Tokaryk 2005, 22).<sup>28</sup> 'Justice', in effect, has become as an entirely abstract dimension, wholly disconnected from its concrete embodiment – a law which spreads terror and disruption among the population. The abstractness of the law system, enforced by the representatives and agents of the nation's political power, catachrestically circumscribes its pretext, the game of capitalism; easy to play, once you know the rules, like the corrupt businesspeople and government officials who know that there are two sets of rules, the official one and the unofficial one, and who know that it is only if one obeys the latter while pretending to obey the former that one is able to play the game.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, Maneck's father, 'attempting to take on the soft-drink opponents who did not observe the rules of the game, who played draughts using chess pieces' (Mistry 1997, 271), never learns to play the game of capitalism properly. 'Learning' is however a word which should be modified here, since it only applies to the more well-to-do classes, the middle- and upper classes.<sup>30</sup> Om and Ishvar (and their 'friends' like the hair-

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<sup>28</sup> Tokaryk continues: 'If Beggarmaster seems more brutal and violent ... it is only because he has no practical need to legitimize his actions in any terms other than those provided by the street itself' (Tokaryk 2005, 22). A comparison of Beggarmaster with another marginal, yet recurrent, figure in the novel, namely Sergeant Kesar, demonstrates this point, insofar as both embody a set of specific laws. Sergeant Kesar, for example, strictly follows the orders given to him by his superiors, but he returns home feeling 'miserable from those assignments', and, as a consequence, chooses to 'get drunk, abuse his wife, beat his children' (Mistry 1997, 322). Although we are told that he has troubles with his conscience, the work he carries out is, however, no less violent and harassing than Beggarmaster's. The only time he is doing something that he feels good about is ironically when he breaks the law; when he arrests the goondas in Dina's apartment because of the murders of two beggars which they have not committed.

<sup>29</sup> Throughout the novel we are given countless examples of corruption and bribery. For example, when a customer refuses to pay for some clothes which Nawaz, the unkind tailor with whom Ishvar and Om stay when they first arrive in the city, has made for him, the tailor embarrasses him in front of his colleagues. The customer is however 'well-connected' (Mistry 1997, 299), and has Nawaz arrested: 'With the right influence and a little cash, sending people to jail is very easy' (ibid.). Siddarth Dube writes: 'Indians of every class were soon opposed to the Emergency, as in one way or another they ... suffered from the suspension of democratic processes and the abuses inherent in dictatorial rule. By the end of the Emergency, some 200,000 people had been arrested or ordered to be arrested. A large number of these were political leaders, but many others were the victims of personal vendettas' (Dube 1988, 109).

<sup>30</sup> The Kohlah family and Dina Dalal's family both belong to the Parsi middle class, while Om and Ishvar belong to the low Chamaar caste. The student activist Avinash comes from the working class, while Valmik represents the professional class. Lastly, the novel portrays the bottom of society – the beggars, of which Om and Ishvar eventually become part.

collector Rajaram and the Monkey Man) for example, are excluded from participating in this game. When the tailors are being forced to listen to one of the prime minister's political rallies, the text weaves together scenes of Om playing cards with Rajaram while the prime minister's speech is heard in between: 'He played his card ... took back the card and played another, while the features of the new Twenty-Point Programme were outlined' (265).<sup>31</sup> The ironic meaning of the scene is not only that the Twenty-Point Programme, vaguely being heard in the background of their card game, as it affects the lives of Om and Ishvar, is decidedly not a game to them (Om is castrated, while Ishvar's legs are amputated), but that it is a game played precisely with the goal of eliminating their significance (e.g. through sterilisation campaigns).<sup>32</sup>

Avinash, Maneck's student friend, is the only one among the novel's characters, who actively take up a political fight against the injustice of Indira Gandhi's state, actively taking up the role as the opponent in the game of the state of emergency.<sup>33</sup> When Maneck reproaches him for no longer finding time to play chess because of his involvement in political activities, Avinash says: 'I'm playing it all the time. Everything I do is chess' (245). Later, when Avinash is in trouble because of his political activities, Maneck 'remembered the early days with him, when their friendship was new. Everything I do is chess, Avinash had once said. Now he was under serious check. Had he castled in time,

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<sup>31</sup> Compare this 'public' card game to another card game, taking place within the confines of the private home; this card game, which Nusswan forces Dina and Ruby to play on Sundays, functions primarily to evoke the *illusion* of an a-political, domestic space: 'He observed the session religiously. It breathed a feeble reality into his dream of a close family' (Mistry 1997, 575).

<sup>32</sup> The issue of sterilisation is treated thoroughly in Mistry's novel, both at a symbolic level – as the sterility of a national politics – as well as at a concrete-literal level. For an historical account of the sterilisation campaign during Gandhi's state of emergency, see Siddarth Dube (1988); 106-109

<sup>33</sup> Avinash's class consciousness is fuelled by the bitterness of his father's fate. When Maneck asks him what his father is doing, Avinash angrily retorts: 'He's been running a fucking loom for thirty years, okay?' (Mistry 1997, 237). Although Avinash's father has tuberculosis, he is forced to continue to work 'amid the dust and fibres to support the family'; if he does not work, the family is forced to move from the room they have rented from the factory, 'and there was nowhere else to go' (238).



protected by three pawns and a rook?’ (271). Avinash has not, as it turns out, which Maneck eventually discovers when he tries to return his friend’s chess set; the grieving parents of Avinash inform Maneck that he has been killed by the authorities. Overcome by shock, Maneck forgets to give them the chess set; this, apparently insignificant, detail achieves a larger symbolic importance within the narrative economy of the figure of Maneck. That is to say, one should not only see this ‘forgetting’ as caused by Maneck’s shock condition, but also as a vital part of a process of class consciousness gradually gaining weight throughout the rest of the novel, namely Maneck’s fateful realisation of the concrete meaning of Avinash’s words – ‘Everything I do is chess’. It is a realisation which does not become fully conscious until the epilogue of the novel, precisely because it only works *retrospectively*, when the act of ‘forgetting’ (both the chess set, and, in a more broad sense, the act of ‘forgetting’ as such) can be inscribed in an overall political-symbolic framework of remembering, which at the same time – because of its retrospectivity – becomes a recognition of irretrievability, of human failure and futility.

Mistry’s text constantly dwells on a series of recurrent, fetishised objects – something I will come back to a little later – and in particular the chess set, to which Maneck repeatedly returns, not only because it represents the memory of lost friendship, but also because it represents the embodiment of his undoing. Significantly, he never finds someone with whom he can play chess after Avinash is gone, trying both Dina and Om, who reject the game. Instead, he plays with himself. When the apartment has been destroyed by the goondas, Maneck passively withdraws to his room: “‘Time is running out, you have still so much to do!’” (441) Dina angrily yells at him, but instead of packing his things, Maneck ‘had the chessboard set up, and was staring at the pieces’ (ibid.).

Why this inactivity, not only at this critical moment, but also more generally about Maneck's Hamlet-like character as such – his pathetic melancholy and his chronic inability to face the brutal realities of the world? It is true that he does take initiative on his own at times (for example to finish the dresses for Mrs. Gupta, when Om and Ishvar involuntarily have been taken to a working camp), but both the decision to go to university and the decision to work abroad are taken by Maneck's parents; his most independent decision throughout the entire novel is ironically to commit suicide.<sup>34</sup> This act, the suicide, appears as a strange, awkward (rather than tragic) and somewhat unresolved denouement of the novel. One might however see this awkwardness as related to the disjunctions generated by the political-symbolic meaning that is retrospectively bestowed on the chess set. Maneck forgets the chess set in Dina's apartment before he travels abroad (and forgets everything else for eight years), and he forgets it in the restaurant when he returns home, but on each occasion it is returned to him. Originally, Maneck borrowed the chess set from Avinash, and forgot to give it back to him – the act of forgetting should here be seen as the ambiguous or unconscious realisation of the fact that the chess set was meant for him (and nobody else, to paraphrase Kafka's gatekeeper), which only much later becomes a conscious realisation – precisely through the act of remembering. The political-symbolic meaning of the chess set – Avinash's chess set – here becomes clear; it means action, political action – struggle, confrontation. The chess set symbolically embodies Maneck's call for action, his chance to participate in the game of the state of emergency, to play the

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<sup>34</sup> Just before he takes the initiative to finish the dresses after the tailors have been taken to a working camp, Maneck tellingly despairs in his room, reflecting on suicide and the pointlessness of memory: 'So what was the point of possessing memory? It didn't help anything. In the end it was all hopeless ... Maneck began to weep ... Everything ended badly. And memory only made it worse ... Unless you lost your mind. Or committed suicide. The slate wiped clean. No more remembering, no more suffering' (Mistry 1997, 336). At this point, however, his self-pity is eventually replaced by pity (for Om, Ishvar and Dina). Later in the novel, Maneck makes another independent decision, namely to return permanently to India and take over his father's old shop; but this decision, as we know, is of course never materialised.

role of the opponent in a world where everything is politicised, which is precisely what Maneck has avoided by going to the Middle-east.<sup>35</sup>

This also explains not only Maneck's suicide but also the awkwardness of it, and furthermore explains why the novel's epilogue is set seven years after the state of emergency officially ended; by the time Maneck returns, eight years after he left the country, it is too late to act.<sup>36</sup> Much earlier in the novel, Maneck taught Om to play another kind of game, consisting of strings being collected in a ball: 'We used to play a game when I was little, unravelling it and trying to remember where each piece of string came from' (490). Avinash's chess set represents such a string of remembering, and all the implications attached to this string. Confronted with the chess set at this particular moment, it thus represents Maneck's failure, his *undoing*; the last thought that passes his mind before he dies, 'was that he still had Avinash's chessmen' (612).

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<sup>35</sup> Among the novel's four main characters, Maneck is the only one possessing a real opportunity to voice critical resistance; in contrast, Om's resistance is limited to the defiant, yet in the end foolish and harmless, act of spitting in the direction of Thakur Dharamsi, which causes the latter to demand the castration of Om. When Nuswani, Dina's brother (on whom she is economically dependent), expresses his wish to eliminate all the beggars of India, Maneck desperately thinks of a response, but gives up: 'The bizarre aphorisms were starting to grate on him, but he did not possess the ammunition to launch even a modest counterattack. If only Avinash were here. He would straighten out this idiot. He wished he had paid more attention when Avinash talked politics' (Mistry 1997, 373). The character of Maneck stands between Om, about whom Dina says that he resembles Maneck except being less fortunate (547), and Avinash, and lets both of them down in the end.

<sup>36</sup> In a crude schematic, *A Fine Balance*'s first five chapters introduce us to the setting, fills us with background information about the characters, and outlines the 'stakes' of the narrative – the accumulation of goals, dreams, risks, omens, determinants etc.; after that the novel is followed by five chapters (VI-X) in which relations are mended, consolidated and established; then the 'crisis' chapters follow, in which these relations are being put to test (XI-XV); and finally there is the chapter, 'The Circle Is Completed', in which the threads and lines of the novel come to a dead end. In the epilogue we jump ahead eight years to a stage *after* the end; as though the novel, after its grand design is complete, collects all the small snippets, scraps and pieces left over. During these eight years since the state of emergency, 'nothing has changed ... Living each day is to face one emergency or another' (Mistry 1997, 581), as a taxi driver tells Maneck.

### **Stitching, Narrating, Describing**

In Mistry's text the act of returning is a potential figure of disaster. After having been trained as a tailor, Ishvar's brother Narayan returns to their parents' village with great success, which provokes hatred and jealousy among higher-caste people, among whom Thakur Dharamsi eventually kills the family in one of the cruellest scenes in the novel. Ishvar and Om narrowly escape, but when they return to the area, because of the latter's wedding, they meet the family's old nemesis Thakur Dharamsi again, now a prominent politician, who orders the doctors to castrate the coming bridegroom. For much of the novel, Dina struggles hard not to look back, following closely the mantra 'The road towards self-reliance could not lie through the past' (56). But eventually she is forced to give up her self-reliance and return to her brother's house, where Maneck meets her, almost unrecognisable, and almost unable to recognise him because of her poor sight. At this point, when Dina returns the chess set to him, Maneck is of course himself returning – firstly to attend the funeral of his father, and secondly to revisit, he imagines, 'Om, happily married ... and Ishvar, the proud grand-uncle ... and Dina Aunty, supervising the export tailoring in her little flat' (598).

Maneck's great expectations, as evoked during the stay at his parents' home, stand in contrast to an existence abroad in total alienation, 'now as it had been when he had landed there eight years ago' (585). The description of his life in Dubai, or what he remembers of it, resembles the problematic of what Lukács saw as characteristic of the *naturalist* style, in which the 'so-called action is only a thread on which the still lives are disposed in a superficial, ineffective fortuitous sequence of isolated, static pictures' (Lukács

1978, 144). What Maneck's life has become abroad is precisely such a thread upon which static, isolated images indifferently pass by.<sup>37</sup>

In his realist writings, Lukács stresses the importance of what he calls 'the natural principle of epic selection' (Lukács 1978, 130). *Selectivity* is particularly important, he continues, in relation to objects, and how to treat objects in the novel, insofar as one avoids the Sisyphean task of *description*, which according to Lukács means the rejection of any principles of selection. It is the principle of selection (or inference) that stands at the heart of the novelistic dynamic (both according to *The Theory of the Novel* and Lukács's realist writings)<sup>38</sup> – as a de-reifying force breaking the ground for the re-conceptualisation of relations between humans and things (the subject-object problematic); consequently, 'the loss of the narrative interrelationship between objects and their function in concrete human experiences means a loss of artistic significance' (131). Objects must be 'related to men's life', their function must be exposed 'in the mesh of human destinies, introducing things only as they play a part in the destinies, actions and passions of men' (137). What both the early and the later Lukács point toward is the necessity of integrating human action within the world of objects: 'Without the interaction of struggle among people, without testing in action, everything in composition becomes arbitrary and incidental' (134).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> One image from abroad he remembers is of an Indian maidservant held as slave in one of the homes he once visits: 'Overworked, molested repeatedly by the men of the house, locked up in her room at night, her passport confiscated, she had begged him for help, speaking in Hindi so her employer would not understand ... Uneasy about intervening, all he had done was anonymously telephone the Indian consulate' (Mistry 1997, 584). When his mother asks about his life in Dubai, he 'searched his mind for things to add, and realized he did not know the place, didn't want to ... His uprooting never seemed to end' (585).

<sup>38</sup> Although, as I argued in chapter three, in the later Lukács's writings the authority of this principle is ultimately deferred to a process *outside* of the literary work itself.

<sup>39</sup> To stretch Lukács's principle of selectivity in a perhaps rather mechanical way, one might see an echo of this when Ishvar tells Dina, while she is working on her patchwork quilt, that 'the talent is in joining the pieces, the way you have' (Mistry 1997, 489). To Maneck, noting how difficult it will be to make all the bits and scraps match properly, Dina says: 'Difficult, yes, but that's where taste and skill come in. What to select, what to leave out – and which goes next to which' (273).

One example of the ways in which Mistry's text re-conceptualises and re-historicises the relationship between objects and human life through the principle of selectivity is given when Maneck, while staying with his mother after the father's funeral, finds some old newspapers in the basement:

In a corner of the cellar stood a stack of mouldering newspapers ... The newspaper dates went back ten years, and jumped haphazardly over the decade. Strange, he thought, because Daddy used them up regularly in the store, for wrapping parcels or padding packages. These must have been overlooked ... There were articles about abuses during the Emergency, testimony of torture victims, outrage over the countless deaths in police custody. (Mistry 1997, 592-593)

Going through the horrors, injustices and misfortunes of the state of emergency, and the time following it (that is, everything of which Maneck was not a part), Maneck randomly, and without much interest, summarises ten years of history as compressed in a stack of mouldering newspapers, until he suddenly discovers the story of Avinash's three sisters, who have hung themselves for similar reasons as Thomas Hardy's Little Father Time. It is at this point that the 'object' of the mouldering newspaper transcends itself, revealing a dimension of history to the alienated Maneck, not as abstract and impersonal, but as the trace of concrete, human struggle – one that is under erasure, almost forgotten and lost in a dark, humid basement that has become the temporary sanctuary of human defeat.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The scene in the basement is linked to an earlier passage in the novel during which Maneck talks with the character Mr. Valmik, once proof-reader for *The Times of India*. Valmik lost his job because his eyes became allergic to printing ink, while proof-reading newspaper articles. His colleagues believed he was overcome emotionally by reading about the tragedies of the nation, but Valmik stresses that this was not the case; he would never let emotions disturb his job. Valmik is not heartless, he tells Maneck, but adds that 'sometimes normal behaviour has to be suppressed, in order to carry on' (Mistry 1997, 229). Maneck, feeling a bit uneasy about this, later follows Valmik's advice, carrying on 'in the usual way', reading newspapers without becoming emotionally engaged: 'He began going rapidly through the newspapers. After a while even the pictures looked the same. Train derailment, monsoon floods, bridge collapses, ministers being garlanded, ministers making speeches, ministers visiting areas of natural and man-made disasters. He flipped the pages between glances out the window' (593-594). A few moments later he reads about Avinash's three dead sisters, at which point the abstractness of history, as rendered in the newspapers, begins to dissolve into concrete, real human suffering, that makes him despair and rage; Maneck's suicide can in this context be seen as an act of defiance, the individual's hysterical rage against collective indifference.

The 'object' of the newspaper is here inserted within a narrative dynamic through which it re-conceptualises Maneck's reified relation to history, generating anew 'experiences of hope and memory' (in a similar way to what Lukács envisioned in *The Theory of the Novel*).<sup>41</sup> It is after this episode that Maneck decides to leave Dubai permanently, in order to take over his father's shop, and visit Dina and the tailors in Bombay. And yet to return to 'the strange magic' (574) of memory in the way Maneck does, is at the same time a return which is necessarily restricted to, and subsumed within, the confines of an already-written history, both in an overall, trans-individual sense (Maneck arrives in India simultaneously with the closure of an epoch, Indira Gandhi's death), and in an individual-personal sense (the life stories of Dina, Om and Ishvar have all taken their fateful curve). It is an already-written history that Maneck has left behind, and which in his absence has taken a bend that leaves him incapable of reconnecting with it again when he returns, ironically because of his memory.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> As Tyler Tokaryk argues (following Harry Shaw's *Narrating Reality*), *A Fine Balance* puts a lot of emphasis on individual objects, 'in an effort to explore the "systems" of which the objects are a part, not because the objects are significant in and of themselves' (Tokaryk, 2005, p.16). Recurrent objects, used in different situations and for different purposes, taking on a variety of different meanings, include for example umbrellas (Mistry, 1997, 34; 35-36; 258; 301; 419; 430-433; 438; 475; 538; 560; 608; 614), plastic-folders (85-86; 89-90; 352-353; 554), nameplates (41; 442; 447; 568; 600), and, of course, hair (58-59; 65; 172-174; 270; 297; 392-393; 405; 478; 550; 569; 583; 602-604; 607). In each of these instances it would be possible to interpret them as being part of a wider process demonstrating how the overall system, in which they are inserted, functions.

<sup>42</sup> When Maneck meets Dina again after eight years, she tries to 'breathe life into him' (Mistry 1997, 606): "'You remember how we used to cook together?'" He nodded. "'You remember the kittens?'" He nodded again' (ibid.). When Maneck a little later meets Ishvar and Om, now beggars, he is so paralysed that he cannot utter a word, despite his intentions. Later, Om concludes that 'He didn't recognize us' (613); but, as we know, not only did Maneck recognise them, it was precisely because of the shock of this recognition that 'his words of love and sorrow and hope remained muted like stones ... he saw that Ishvar was sitting on a cushion. No, not a cushion. It was dirty and fraying, folded to the size of a cushion. The patchwork quilt' (608). The patchwork quilt, now 'dirty and fraying', is one of the overall metaphors of epic memory in Mistry's text; when Maneck discovers it in this context, it has a petrifying effect because its metaphorical dimension has been transformed into a traumatic reality. A sad reunion of misrecognitions, the scene symbolically enacts the way in which the dimensions of connectedness and relatedness as narrative principles work in Mistry's novel; the relation between Om, Ishvar and Maneck is at this stage one that has become hidden or unformulable, while at the same time being present or manifest, in a traumatic sense.

If chapter XV ('Family Planning') tells the undoing of Om and Ishvar, chapter XVI ('The Circle is Completed') tells the undoing of Dina. After Dina has moved back to her brother's house, that is, after she has lost her apartment, she 'covered herself with the quilt and took to recounting the abundance of events in the tightly knit family of patches ... If she stumbled along the way, the quilt nudged her forward' (573).<sup>43</sup> What makes Dina able to start looking back (something she distinctly has refused to do throughout the novel) – and to *return*, is the fact that the patchwork quilt by now is finished, even if it lacks one corner, as Ruby, Nusswan's wife, points out; but Dina has decided that 'there was nothing further to add' (ibid.). This closure of the quilt's design symbolically fixates and frames the story of the time that the four main characters have spent together, the stories they have told to each other, and the experiences they have gone through.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Related to the symbolic act of sewing the patchwork quilt is the frequent occurrence of rain in Mistry's text. When Rustom and Dina fall in love, they watch 'the fine needles of rain slanting in the light of the streetlamp' (Mistry 1997, 34); later, after Rustom tragically has died, Dina breaks off her relationship with Fredoon because she 'could see [the rain] slanting in needles past the streetlamp' (60), which reminds her of Rustom. Maneck is reminded of Avinash while the 'Rain was pounding the street' (417). In Dubai, Maneck has missed the rain (592). He reads newspapers in his father's old basement on a 'gloomy, rain-filled afternoon' (593). Rain, he feels, 'had made the years fall away. He was her [Maneck's mother] little boy again, drenched and helpless' (597). And when he travels to the city to revisit Dina and the tailors on that fateful, last nostalgic trip of his, 'rain followed [him] down the country, down the hills and across the plains, for thirty-two hours on the southbound train' (599). Significantly, to the characters belonging to the lower classes in the novel, rain takes on quite a different significance – not so much implying a mnemonic dimension as much as a concrete-practical concern. For example, to the Chamaars (a caste preparing and selling animal skins), to whom Ishvar and his family belong, rain is a bad thing because no animals die (103). When Om and Ishvar move to the slum village, rain is still a bad thing: 'The monsoon season started, and on the first night of rain, the tailors were awakened by the roof leaking on their bedding' (182). And to the rent collector Ibrahim, before he is given a plastic folder, rain means that he 'had to recopy documents on which the ink had decided to frolic with the rain in lunatic swirls' (89).

<sup>44</sup> Much of their story takes place, or is re-told or re-visited, in Dina's apartment, and, to a lesser extent, the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel (as well as in other, small pockets of communities emerging here and there in the novel, for example in Ashraf's tailor shop and in the slum quarter; conversely, no sense of community or storytelling emerges in Nusswan's home). Dina's apartment becomes a moderate-secular utopian space in which borders, limits, balances are transgressed and broken, but which also, as Laura Moss has observed, is a fragile and ultimately doomed space: 'If the apartment is viewed as the secular site of convergence of individuals in a disruptive society, then the collapse of the community in the apartment is inevitable in the Emergency ... the individual can not be extricated from the community in this narrative' (Moss 2000, 160). Dina's apartment and the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel are places where individual stories of human lives – at the human-individual level – are being told, heard, nurtured and collected; and both places eventually collapse and disappear. In Dina's apartment, the activities must be kept secret (from the landlord); eventually, when



But the novel does not end here, because we still need Maneck's story, that is, the story of his doings after leaving Bombay (just as we have subsequently heard about the misfortunes of Dina and the tailors). Maneck's story is, however, absent (like the missing corner in Dina's finished patchwork quilt), or at least postponed; the thread of his life is eventually taken up in the novel's epilogue, taking place eight years after the adventurous time in Dina's apartment, and, as mentioned, we hear only very little of what has happened to him in between (that is, during his time abroad). And *when* it is told, Maneck's undoing (an undoing ultimately caused by the knowledge of the other characters' undoing) has already become an excess, a waste, one of the 'leftovers of fabric' (194) after the textual patchwork has come to an end – an undoing which thus furthermore becomes the symbolic undoing of the novel as a whole; an open-ended closure that frames and knots the text-within-the-text (the story of the four main characters together), leaving it undisturbed to its work of remembrance.<sup>45</sup> With Maneck's death the four main life threads of the novel have come to an end.

But, significantly, the novel does not end here either, that is, it does not *finish* with Maneck's suicide. It ends with a small, banal episode – like one of those small snippets left over when the overall design has been completed – during which Dina secretly feeds Om and Ishvar while her brother and his wife are out. While they are eating, a 'thread had

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the four main characters have told their stories to each other, when there are no secrets to be kept from the landlord anymore, Dina is forced to give up her apartment. Conversely, we are told, 'There were no secrets at the Vishram – everything was out in the open: the man chopping vegetables, another frying them in the huge black-bottomed pan, a boy washing up' (Mistry 1997, 77); later, when it no longer exists in its old form, the kitchen is kept apart – kept secret – from the eating area, yet still fundamentally the same: 'The cook's perspiring helper was chopping, frying, stirring; a skinny little boy was scraping off dirty plates and soaking them in the sink' (610). Significantly, Maneck forgets Avinash's chess set twice, the first time in Dina's apartment, and second time in the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel (by that time transformed into a fashionable, modern place), suggesting that the act of forgetting here in a symbolic sense precisely implies collapse and disappearance of individual stories as well as individuality itself.

<sup>45</sup> Dina, for example, leaves her memories again; she folds the quilt and locks it away because she becomes 'frightened of the strange magic it worked on her mind, frightened of where its terrain was leading her. She did not want to cross that border permanently' (Mistry 1997, 574).

unravelling from the quilt' (614) Ishvar is now using as a cushion for his small board with castors. He borrows a needle, fixes it (thus symbolically preserving their collective narrative memory undamaged from the harsh realities of the present), and soon the tailors are on their way again. Dina closes the door, thinking: 'Those two made her laugh every day. Like Maneck used to, once' – then she cleans the kitchen, and 'decided to take a nap before starting the evening meal' (ibid.). The ordinariness and cosiness of the episode stands in stark contrast to the previous scene, Maneck's pathetic suicide, and as such, it both restores the balance of the novel, 'a fine balance between hope and despair' (231), while also suggesting (as does indeed the epilogue as well – or even the novel as a whole) that for every grand design there will always be 'little garbage pieces' left over, ready to be put 'to good use' (286).

### **Conclusion: Realism, Form and Balance**

I have argued that the contemporary field of postcolonial studies may learn an important lesson from the trajectory of Lukács's reflections on the novel – from *Theory of the Novel*, where he develops an argument about the potential of the novelistic form, to his realist writings, where this potential to some extent is transferred to a set of extra-literary norms – a trajectory reflecting the increasingly institutionalised and dogmatic context that Lukács found himself situated in. The contemporary field of postcolonial studies is similarly haunted by the negative effects of institutionalisation (without thereby saying, of course, that the situation of postcolonial studies is identical to the situation of Lukács). Having successfully secured its position within the institutions of academia as an acknowledged, unavoidable, discipline of study, one might argue that its new-found authority is in danger

of transforming its radical insights into a series of dogmatic, institutionalised and self-congratulating gestures. I have argued that one of the places where such a danger is particularly notable is the place of the literary. This is not to say that the literary as such has disappeared – the literary still represents one of the most important objects of study in postcolonial studies, but the reasons for this importance seem increasingly to have become ambiguous. This ambiguity, I argued, is partly related to the ways in which the dimension of the literary to some extent has become channelled into institutionalised conceptions – reduced to a narrow set of canonised expectations of what constitutes a proper, and properly representative, postcolonial literary text; that is, expectations of the potential of specific, canonised forms, styles, techniques and modalities that are seen as politically radical and resistant. Implied in this logic are also the ways in which non-canonised postcolonial forms, styles, techniques and modalities have been channelled into equally, if not more, stereotypical conceptions of their allegedly negative potential.

The notion of realism, as I have argued, appears to occupy an unacceptable position in much contemporary criticism, an unacceptability which on the other hand also designates an ideologically coded process of radicalising modalities that are apparently antithetical to whatever the project of the realist modality may represent (in its variously stereotyped versions – stereotyped, that is, because of ideologically coded reasons). Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is perhaps one of the clearest recent examples of a postcolonial novel employing a realist style. And yet while several critics are willing to accept this, it is often followed by some qualifications, reservations, a 'however'. One such example is Sharmani Patricia Gabriel's Bhabha-inspired discussion of Mistry's text in the article 'Diasporic Hybridities and the "Patchwork Quilt": Contesting Nationalist History and Other Fictions

in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, in which she writes that Mistry's novel 'appears to have been influenced by the narrative concerns of nineteenth-century European social realism ... *A Fine Balance* is fuelled by the desire to root narrative in the realities of the diverse social, political and class formations of Indian national life' (Gabriel 2003, 87). Symptomatically, this 'concession' is soon followed by a qualification: 'However, although Mistry accedes to the representational power of the realist novel ... he is also aware of the inadequacies of the traditional realist novel to represent the kind of imagined community that is the nation' (ibid.). It should be noted here that what Sharmani Patricia Gabriel sees as the 'inadequacies of the traditional realist novel' more or less correlates with Benedict Anderson's rather simplifying and unsophisticated notion of the realist novel, as embodying 'empty homogeneous time'. The fact that Anderson here is attributed with the final authority of whatever the traditional realist novel does and desires, tells us, I would argue, more about the framework of criticism from which Gabriel's reflections emerge, than it tells us something about literary realism proper. What we see is a critical construction or fiction which allows Gabriel to formulate a dichotomy between a 'bad realism' (as embodying an Andersonian imagined community) and a 'good realism' (i.e. a modality that in fact is not quite realism after all) which 'sets out to destabilize those aspects of the realist narrative that contribute to the homogenization of the nation's time-space continuum' (88). Thus, although Mistry's text initially *appears* to be realism, Gabriel argues, it turns out in fact to be a *critique* of realism. What emerges from this critical manoeuvre is also a startling blindness, maintained by an institutionalised machinery of constantly repeated mantras, such as 'hybridity', 'incommensurability', 'the liminal', the 'anti-hegemonic', the 'ambivalent', 'difference' – as though these magic (or merely

authoritative) concepts were to be seen as natural synonyms of the figures of the postcolonial. Exemplifying this blindness is Sharmani Patricia Gabriel's reading of one of the dominating metaphors in Mistry's text, the patchwork quilt:

For Mistry, the national narrative of Indianness, like the novel's patchwork quilt, is construed not through the presumed unities and homogeneities of nationalist narratives but through what Homi Bhabha calls the 'incommensurability', which takes into account multiple and contending realities. In this way, the nationalist fantasy of the national "people-as-one" is constantly challenged and disrupted in the novel by the reality of the resistant discourses of minorities. (94)

But one should also ask what a patchwork quilt is if not also unifying? It may be, as I have tried to show, a very different operation of homogenisation and unification than the stereotypical notion of 'national homogeneity' that Sharmani Patricia Gabriel has in mind, but to ignore the text's configuration of sewing, linking, stitching, and putting-together (that is, to ignore the text's realist aesthetics), in order to focus on disruption, subversion, and incommensurability (that is, to focus on the text's alleged critique of realism), seems to be a misreading that is not only blind, but wilfully blind to its own blindness.<sup>46</sup>

Much of the critique of realism within a postcolonial perspective is undoubtedly related to the, by now, fetishised critical norm of literary *resistance*. As Laura Moss (herself being one of the few postcolonial scholars defending realism) observes, 'the prevalent view – both popular and academic – is that, for whatever reason, realism and

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<sup>46</sup> Other examples include Peter Morey who writes that whereas 'several critics' have misrecognised Mistry's text 'as merely perpetuating the traditions of the nineteenth-century European realist novel', it uses 'patterns of recurrence and cyclicity and metafictional elements' (implying that it, for those reasons, cannot be 'merely' realism), and that *A Fine Balance* rather should be seen as 'post-colonial metarealism' (Morey 2000, 183-184). Ian Almond basically reads *A Fine Balance* as a novel that 're-orientalizes' the East (via Yeats as inter-text), a process which competes with the text's 'more political vocabulary of social realism' (Almond 2004, 215). Tokaryk offers an explicit 'defence' of Mistry's realist form, referring to both Harry Shaw's *Narrating Reality* and Lukács's realist writings but follows neither in a consequent way; instead he chooses to read *A Fine Balance* in terms of Bakhtin's notion of 'grotesque realism' (Tokaryk 2005, 25), as an example of 'postmodern storytelling in a realist novel' (ibid.).

resistance do not converge' (Moss 2000, 158).<sup>47</sup> Opposed to such dogmatic views, Ian Almond calls Mistry's text 'a novel of social protest – but one in which all the happy, surviving characters are those who have decided to work with the system, not against it' (Almond 2004, 211) – an argument which seems to suggest that the novel is ultimately one of defeat and resignation; but one should, I think, also hesitate to judge the novel merely in terms of resistance or resignation along a political barometer that itself has become a homogenising, reductive device. As my previous discussion should demonstrate, I am not against a reading of the novel as one of social protest or resistance, quite the contrary, but what I have tried to stress is that one should, to follow Spivak's pertinent advice from *Death of a Discipline*, also be cautious to avoid drawing 'too-quick conclusions about gender, freedom of speech, and modernity' (Spivak 2003, 61); indeed, what I have been stressing in my reading of the text is not so much that one should not read the text as, say, a critique of the impact of globalisation and neo-colonial structures of economy upon the lives of citizens in India in the 1970s, but rather that such a reading also involves a leap, an abstraction, which precisely cuts out another dimension in Mistry's text – which I have seen as the workings of the literary. Literariness here should not be equated merely with a collection of anti-realist textual strategies that in turn are being equated with 'hybridity' or 'incommensurability', in a wholly predictable and formulaic way – and, even more

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<sup>47</sup> In the short article 'Can Rohinton Mistry's Realism Rescue the Novel?', Laura Moss writes that one of the reasons why critics hesitate to call Mistry's *A Fine Balance* a realist text, is because it is often conceived to be 'degrading to see Mistry's writing as derivative of a European form, where the Indian writer has now "caught up," in the literary evolutionary scheme of things, to the point where British writers were in the nineteenth century' (Moss 2000, 160). Moss argues that whereas Mistry's novel undoubtedly is inspired by nineteenth-century realism, it is also inspired by social realism as developed by Indian writers such as Anand, Rao and Bhattacharya. To Moss, *A Fine Balance* is a text which resists at the level of representation, showing that a 'moderate position [i.e. the subject as situated both within a community and as an individual in society] cannot exist': 'Mistry's realist novel concludes with the collapse of the apartment community which, in turn, leads to Dina's loss of independence, Ishvar's loss of his legs, Om's loss of his "manhood" and Maneck's loss of life' (ibid.).

predictably, being opposed to 'the inadequacies of traditional realism'. Rather, what I have called *A Fine Balance*'s interpretive-utopian potential – the potential of the *literary* as it works and unfolds as an ethical-singular discourse within a particular postcolonial context (such as the epoch of the state of emergency in India) – is precisely the exploration of the ways in which such leaps are constructed, shaped, and motivated; the exploration of the (im-)possibility of establishing such links and relations in the first place, and furthermore the (im-)possibility as well as necessity of shaping such links into social critique.

Mistry's novel can be seen as an attempt to explore, negotiate and ultimately maintain a formal balance between different levels of postcolonial historicity, as they are brought together through a specific, causally-inferred plot; a 'truthful' design working through, in order to establish, a narrative dynamic that integrates abstract truth with concrete experience, and thus attempting to resolve the contradictions as experienced in between the different levels of historicity. It is a process of resolution which ultimately becomes an attempt to transcend the abstractness of representativity as such, a transcendence which, in its ideal form, produces an immediate, spontaneous sense of history – that is, what Lukács calls 'experiences of hope and memory'. In *A Fine Balance*, the national history of India – as shaped and determined by its colonial past – is weaved together with the lives of individuals from different classes and backgrounds, through a narrative dynamic scanning and revealing the contradictions, leaps, and abstractions as well as the concrete effects and consequences generated in between those levels. Events, as they are experienced at a concrete-human level, do not have the authority to be translated into a legitimate law, that is, they remain accidental, meaningless. By exploring and interpreting the ways in which events become connected, disconnected, attached or detached to and

from one another within the framework of a particular historical epoch, that of India during Indira Gandhi's state of emergency, Mistry's postcolonial realist form shapes and unifies irreconcilable perspectives into one inseparable unity – a novelistic dynamic which traces the possibilities of *de-fetishished* forms of experiences; forms of experiences elevated to a level *above* the purely random, contradictory. Mistry's novel provides an interpretive-utopian perspective integrated with, and confirmed through, the experiences of concrete human struggle – a fine balance in a world out of balance.



## Afterword

Postcolonial studies emerged as an academic discipline in the wake of what Neil Lazarus in the book *Resistance in Postcolonial Africa* has called ‘the mourning after’ (the period of widespread disillusionment in the postcolonial world as a response to the unfulfilled or broken promises that had been bred by the event of independence). The field quickly distanced itself from the dreams and hopes that had flourished – and failed – in the years after independence, by developing an alternative, more theoretical, set of imperatives which gradually became bolder and more self-confident, as postcolonial studies came of age. Postcolonial melancholia, as I have construed it in this thesis, constitutes the field’s own moment of disillusionment; a response to the by now widespread fear that postcolonial studies has lost its critical edge, and that it has contributed to the process of global commodification. One of the central arguments I have been proposing is that this loss in particular becomes explicit within the complex relationship between postcolonial criticism and literary texts.

The literary texts I have been using to explore this complex relationship – *Xala*, *Foe*, and *A Fine Balance* – should by no means be seen as ‘representative’ of postcolonial literariness. Rather, each novel, I believe, illustrates *specific* formal-aesthetic problematics that directly and indirectly demonstrate, in their own singular way, why the dimension of the literary is important in postcolonial studies. While I have focused on literary *form* in this thesis, other aspects may equally offer an insightful way into the understanding of the significance of the postcolonial literary, such as for example ‘language’, which I nonetheless deliberately have chosen not to engage with, partly because a significant number of studies on this issue already exist.

By now it should be clear what this thesis has *not* attempted to do; it does not offer a general theory of postcolonial literature as such; it does not offer a wholehearted defence of Georg Lukács's writings; and the thesis has not attempted to offer a systematic revaluation of realism. Rather, what I have attempted to do is to frame my exploration around what I see as the contemporary crisis – or melancholia – of postcolonial studies, the field's blind spots and institutional impasses. I have attempted to establish links between postcolonial melancholia and the dimension of the literary, and finally I have proposed a hermeneutical alternative (via a return to some theoretical issues in the works of Georg Lukács), which reinstates the work of melancholia in the literary work itself.

Partly *because* postcolonial studies emerged as a response to the failures of the socialist-utopian dreams formulated by nationalist and liberationist movements, one of the field's distinctive (and distinctively poststructuralist) traits has been the emphatic employment of strategies of dismantling, subverting, disconnecting, and deconstructing – coupled with a prejudiced suspicion of alternative strategies (typically accused of reproducing colonial logic). The exhaustion of such negative strategies is evidenced in contemporary theoretical writings, expressing misgivings about the field's loss of criticality, its repetitiveness, and its institutionalised homogeneity. At the same time, this moment of melancholia, I have argued, is also an opening, a possibility to move beyond the current impasses and cul-de-sacs. In this thesis, I have been pursuing such an opening by exploring (via Lukács) a notion of the postcolonial literary as basically a connecting, interpretive – or melancholic – process; a reconstructive ethos, or, a dynamic of working-through *at the level of form*.

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